

THE FRENCH OFFICERS: CRAFTSMEN OF THE CONQUEST
AND PACIFICATION OF TONKIN (1871-1897)

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Military History

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ABSTRACT

THE FRENCH OFFICERS: CRAFTSMEN OF THE CONQUEST AND PACIFICATION OF TONKIN (1871-1897), by Major Maurice Robert de Saint Victor, 173 pages.

From 1871 to 1897, France progressively expanded her colonization over Tonkin, in the North of Vietnam, also called *Indochine*. Three attempts were necessary to completely gain control, then pacify this territory.

Navy and Army officers played a crucial role in this expansion by integrating their action into the political agenda. In such a context, they successively challenged the Annamites and Chinese armies, then finally the local piracy and insurgency. Based on their personal experience and culture, they used an empirical approach to adjust western ways of warfare to the very specific operational environment and the changing political limitations.

During this particular and unique episode, French senior and junior officers continuously upgraded the military forces and tactics to efficiently compete with the various foes and match the Tonkinese particularisms. Therefore, at the end of this period, they had developed a coherent doctrine of pacification mixing politics, economic development and security with the French colonial interests.

To a certain extent, the officers were the key enablers between political willingness and application in the field. They were clearly involved in the adaptation of doctrine and in the field, suffering in their flesh, the integration of Tonkin into the French colonial Empire.

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ACRONYMS

R.A. Rear-Admiral. *Contre-Amiral* in the French Navy

R.G. Resident General. *Résident Général* in the French colonial administration

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CHAPTER 1

MOVING FAR EAST

In the 19th century, France launched a second colonial movement in Algeria and Africa. Mainly seen as a second birth, these colonial wars involved a myriad of local kingdoms, powers or tribes against metropolitan and indigenous French troops. Several times, they were locally defeated or at least defied by local forces before overwhelming the insurgencies, rebellions, or revolts. At the end of the day, the French officers led contingents to success and conquered huge parts of Africa as well as pieces of Asia. The victories mainly relied on the swift adaptation of a European army to colonial warfare and the synergy between arms, services, and civil chain of command to conquer and pacify. That period set the basis of doctrinal and tactical approaches or schools which were taught and learnt in the French military academies before World War I and still serve in the current doctrinal documents. In those battlefields, future famous generals and marshals such as Joffre, Gallieni and Lyautey gained their early experience. They found the indispensable freedom of action and opportunities to mature their personal approach and structure their strategy for their follow-on campaigns.

Nowadays, adaptation through cultural awareness and training remains a doctrinal principle in counter-insurgency and even more in warfare in general. Moreover, the current human centric approach hides the importance of terrain to defeat the enemy. Consequently, this historical case study can set some significant conditions and understanding to establish better professional education for the officers.

Names and Appellations Used in the Thesis

In 1871, Vietnam was known in France as Annam and was a part of Indochina. Thus French rulers decided in 1887 to borrow the geographic description of the Vietnamese peninsula to name this colonial construction made of kingdoms and territories under the influence of China and India: Cochinchina, Vietnam (Annam and Tonkin) and Cambodia. As a result, the population living in Vietnam was called Annamite since the main part of the local population belonged to this ethnic group.

The translation from Vietnamese or French words into English can produce some misunderstanding and inaccuracy for the readers. Moreover, English and French authors used to spell differently the names in the 19th century than in the 20th or 21st centuries. The French forms of the personal names and locations are used to clearly match the primary and secondary sources mainly written in and by French witnesses, historians and researchers.

A Singular Theatre of Operation

History and Sociology of Tonkin deeply Linked with China

The Annamites who populate Indochina migrated from the north and east of China¹ before Christ and belong to the Mongol race.² Annamites formed the bulk of the nine to twelve millions of inhabitants in Tonkin.³ They were socially linked with China regarding the language and cultures. The real indigenous populace represented only a minority who lived in mountainous areas. They were customarily called Muong or Mong and were formed from different aboriginal groups like the Tho or Xa and were ruled by specific laws different from Annam customs.⁴

Notwithstanding a long period of independence, the Celestial Empire conquered Indochina during the 2nd century then reinforced its presence in the 10th century before suffering a local revolt in the 15th century⁵ which resulted in Annam independence in 1427.⁶ The newly independent kingdom established its capital in Hanoi so that this part of the land remained called the Land of Annam.⁷ Nevertheless, Annam recognized the suzerainty of China over its territories and paid a tribute to its former master when a new emperor ascended the throne.⁸ In the 19th century, despite an official independence, the emperor of Annam still considered his territory as a tributary state of China. Regarding the foreign influence, several times the Chinese emperor through his ambassadors claimed this specific statute and privileges. For example, the Marquis of Tseng, Chinese ambassador in Paris, required that France accepted “the vassalage ties which link Annam to China remain as it was in the past”⁹ on 18 August 1883.

Administratively, Tonkin is the northern part of the Kingdom of Annam. The Emperor sat in Hué and ruled his territory with a secret cabinet called *Coma* composed of six ministries.¹⁰ As in China, the mandarins at the higher level and scholars [*lettres*]¹¹ at the lower level administrated the kingdom.¹² For the civil functions, they were recruited by exam and theoretically all Annamites could compete and have access to this corps. Military officers were selected from the best soldiers. They represented the civil servants and officers in charge of ruling the country from the national down to the villages and counties (8th and 9th mandarin rank).¹³ Anchored in Confucianism and respectful of the traditional hierarchy and the customs, these bureaucrats formed a strong obstacle which fuelled the opposition led by the local administration during French colonization of Indochina.

Delta and Mountains: A Specific Terrain

Tonkin occupies the northern part of Annam and is mainly centered on the Red River (Song-Koi) and Thai Bind watersheds.¹⁴ It covers an area of approximately 200,000 square kilometers (125,000 square miles). The region is divided into three distinct geographic areas. The first one is the Delta which runs from the sea and is composed of the main river and its numerous tributaries. The ground is mainly flat with a dense and rich net of rice fields. The main towns are Hanoi, the regional capital (former capital of the kingdom), Sept-Pagodes, Phu-Lang-Thuomg, Tai-Nguyen, Van-Yen and Vietri. The second area was a rolling terrain with several shallow valleys. The towns of Lang-Son, Tuyen Quang, Yen Bai or Van-Bu mark the limit with the mountains of the Haut Tonkin (High Tonkin) covered by jungle. Access to this region was particularly difficult due to the lack of tracks and the terrain. It formed the natural borders of Tonkin with its principal neighbors. Hydrography shapes Tonkin and occupies a specific role in the development of the region. The Red River, its tributaries and canals enable the trade inside the Delta¹⁵ and with the Chinese province of Yunnan.¹⁶ Local population used the waterways as highways which seasonally depended of the water level. Militarily, the draft of water affected the navigability of the gunboats and junks during the winter that reduced the military ability to sustain and support ground operations. Finally, the maritime access from France took place in the Sea of China thanks to the port of Haiphong and the Bay of Along that protected the large ships and transports coming from France or other countries against the vicissitudes of the weather.¹⁷

The description would be incomplete without a description of the climate and its effect on the trafficability and health for the Europeans. In fact, Indochina is subject to

monsoons. Consequently, there are three seasons: summer (April to October), fall (October to January) and winter (January to March). The monsoon occurs during summer and is preceded by high temperatures (80 to 100 F) and followed by a dryer season accompanied by milder temperatures (60 to 80F) then a temperate winter (45 to 60F).¹⁸ This climate facilitated the operations during the beginning of summer and the others seasons but affected the military's ability to carry out large scale operation during the months of August due to the high humidity rate and temperatures.¹⁹

A Long French Colonial Tradition

The First French Colonial Empire and the Far East (17th–18th centuries)

French colonialism started in the sixteenth century and was first focused towards the Atlantic (the Islands of *Terre-Neuve* and Canada called *Nouvelle France*) and West Africa. It was mainly concentrated on trade between France and the overseas territories through a net of commercial harbors. This initial movement fused the royal interests to discover and conquer new territories with the economic benefits that some businessmen and lords could expect from the new trade.²⁰ To facilitate the management of these colonies, the royal administration granted the right to create private companies with the privileges to administer the new territories and the monopoly for commerce. Thus, amid these establishments, the *Compagnie des Indes Orientales* [French Company of Eastern India] was set up to trade with India and China from Madagascar and la Reunion, in

1642.²¹ Later Jean-Baptiste Colbert under Louis XIV's reign and Etienne-Francois duke of Choiseul with Louis XV preserved the system of companies despite the loss of Canada at the battle of Plains of Abraham in 1759, and the French trading stations in India (mainly on the Eastern cost of Hindustan) at the battle of Wandiwash in 1760.²² After

these two defeats and the consequences of the Seven Years War, French colonies returned to a simple commercial project supported by companies without the great desire to develop an empire.

Initially, in Tonkin and Indochina, the religious missions preceded the political and economic colonialism. Sent by the *Société de Jesus*, Fathers Alexander de Rhodes and Antoine Marquez arrived in 1611 and settled in Cao-Bang.²³ With the permission and the support of the local authorities, they built several churches and wrote a dictionary to translate the Annamite language and alphabet into French.²⁴ They took advantage of this situation to map the territories and provide the first useful land and coast maps. This presence was supported by the Society of Foreign Missions created in 1653 and dedicated to develop the missions overseas.²⁵ They transmitted the first piece of knowledge about Vietnam, its language and culture back to France.

Politically, the Catholic missionaries identified not only their own religious benefits but also the interests for France. They facilitated the political connection by establishing the diplomatic relations. In 1687, a first exchange occurred and ensured the presence of missionaries as well as the opening of two harbors to the French trade for the French East India Company. Nevertheless, French national interests were more focused on Siam than Tonkin, which remained under Chinese influence and far from immediate French strategic interests.²⁶ Unfortunately, this initial colonial development did not find real royal support. Thus, when Mgr. Pierre Pigneau de Behaine, a French missionary accompanied by the emperor's son, tried to transmit the request from Hué for strong relations with France in 1787, the royal ministries advised Louis XVI to restrict funding and support to this diplomatic proposal. The Treaty of Versailles (1787) signed between

France and Hué was not fully applied in Vietnam for financial reasons and by a lack of willingness to engage more than a few ships.²⁷ In fact, the events of the French Revolution definitively stopped the development of this project. Despite the lack of a major French commitment, Gia Long, Emperor of Annam, seized Tonkin on 15 June 1801. Nevertheless, this period provided several legacies as the fortresses developed by the French officers along the coast and the rivers were in the Vauban style.²⁸

Therefore, the initial interest in the Far East was mostly driven by common economic and religious visions. Despite some opportunities, French politics were not poised to commit troops or support political settlement far from the metropolitan territory. Tonkin and its vicinity were clearly out of the daily and strategic interests of the nation.

The Second French Colonial Empire in 19th century

After the continental campaigns of the Revolution and the First Empire, the French Government initiated several overseas campaigns to recover its colonial empire lost since Louis XV and XVI's reigns. The second period of French colonization began with the clear enthusiasm to retrieve diplomatic prestige, set some strategic key stations and gain access to new markets as well as resources. Initially, this large competition started with the conquest of Algeria in 1830 under the Charles X and Louis-Philippe' rules. Officially, the struggle with piracy and the reparations for the odious behaviors against the French consul and one French ship led the French government to commit troops.²⁹

The official reasons for waging wars and interventions overseas usually turned around the protection of French nationals and interests. Retaliation and protection of

French citizens triggered several military operations. In Vietnam, Minh Mang issued several laws restricting freedom of faith in 1825. These laws were followed by official and unrestrained persecutions against both foreign missionaries and the Catholic local populace.³⁰ They served as official motives to intervene by French and Spanish ships from 1840 to 1848 and finally in Tourane in 1858.³¹ For the Second Empire, these small military actions restored French confidence in their military capabilities after the disastrous operation in Mexico.³²

As later in Great Britain with Rudyard Kipling and the White Man's Burden written in 1899, the French political will to intervene was similarly fed by debates in the society to diffuse universal values,³³ Western morality, and economic development and for some Catholic values.³⁴ In addition to these factors, French imperialism in Tonkin was also driven by other strong dynamics which progressively reinforced the political will to intervene and conquer territories. Primarily, the rivalry with Great Britain to obtain stations and gain access to the Far East and China fed the race or “scramble”³⁵ for Tonkin as well as a search for routes to the rich region of Yunnan in China. Secondly, economic interests and trade opportunities in Indochina were sponsored by businessmen like the Lyons silk factories, Bordeaux ship-owners and Chamber of Commerce of Marseilles.³⁶ They hoped to find raw materials in large quantity (coal, rubber and silk) in the subsoil and fields. Thirdly, with the conquest or the arrangement to use Indochina, they wanted to set a “balcony on the Pacific” and used these places as strategic trade ports and hubs opening to the Chinese outlet market.³⁷

To support this economic motivation and find new routes to Yunnan, businessmen fused their interests with those of the geographic clubs. They attempted to map the world

and discover new territories and routes. To carry out their scientific goals they financed expeditions in close cooperation with the other lobbies. In Indochina, they initially looked for a way on the Mekong River to reach Yunnan. In 1866, the Chamber of Commerce of Paris, the Ministry of Marine and the Society for Commercial Geography funded the two-year expedition led by Navy Lieutenant de Lagrée and Francis Garnier.³⁸ The common interest between businessmen, politics and geographers facilitated the colonial movement in Indochina and later Tonkin.

Nevertheless, despite these powerful elements, the tribulations in Indochina lasted due to a lack of political vision and understanding of what the national interests were in Asia. Despite the willingness to create a French possession in the Far East as Great Britain did with Hong Kong, the government, and its military and civil servants were not able to follow a constant policy regarding the question of Tonkin. Thus, they initially considered that Tonkin was the piece of Annam that the Kingdom of Spain, their ally during the common retaliations conducted in 1840s, 50s, and 60s, could legitimately claim.³⁹ By the end, the permanent pressure over Annam facilitated the progressive control of the harbors and territories in the south of Indochina. Consequently two protectorates were established in Cambodia (1863) and Cochinchina (1867). When the affair of Tonkin began, France owned a protectorate in the south, some staging areas close to Saigon, a telegraph system linking the local authorities with France (1870) and an initial knowledge about the situation in the region.

The French Armed Forces in the colonial warfare (19th century)

The role of the French forces in the colonial expansion was crucial since few of the French colonies or territories were peacefully conquered during the 19th century. This

study examines several kinds of troops in action. Despite a relative uniformity, their specificities must be stressed in order to understand their interventions.

At the political level, two major ministries handled the military operations and commanded their own units. For the naval campaigns, the driver was usually the Ministry of the Navy and Colonies unless the contingent was too important and the commander-in-chief offered to the Ministry of War. The main reasons for the latter course of action were the size of the forces, the necessary war functions committed, and the willingness to control the employment of their units. This situation regarding the political master clearly disrupted the efficiency of several operations and consistency of the chain of command.⁴⁰ The Ministry of the Navy and Colonies held the navy ships and could commit the *Troupes de Marine* (called Porpoises or *Marsouins*) as ground forces in addition to their companies of debarkation (made of the non-essential members of the crew). Equipped with light artillery and organized as light infantry, the four regiments of *Troupes de Marine* conducted numerous joint operations with the metropolitan forces during the conquest of Algeria in 1830, the campaign in Mexico and the operations in Senegal in addition to their presence in the French islands (Tahiti, Martinique or Guadeloupe).⁴¹ Since they served overseas and during the major French campaigns, the best officers of Saint Cyr and the *Polytechnique* Institution were usually reluctant to join this specific arm but progressively changed their mind and started to serve in the colonies in the mid-19th century.⁴² On the other side, the Ministry of War was responsible for the conduct of the major colonial wars and conventional operations in France.

After the Napoleonic wars, the various kings, the Second Republic, and then the Second Empire kept the traditional appellations and formations. Subsequently, they

added new units during the conquest of the African colonies. Based on the willingness to recruit indigenous soldiers, the French Army created the *Spahis* from the native cavalrymen and the *Tirailleurs Algériens* (1 October 1830) supervised by some French officers and senior non-commissioned officers. The French officers believed that the local soldiers were more resilient and adaptable to the local warfare and terrain. They also expected to increase the amount of forces available to complete their limited metropolitan forces.⁴³ In addition, as part of the transition to a colonial army, they also formed some specific French regiments for the colonial warfare like the *Zouaves* in Algeria (13 June 1832) and *Chasseurs d'Afrique*.⁴⁴

Regarding the recent military interventions, the French forces were committed to several conventional wars: against Russia during the Crimean War (1853-1856), in the French Campaign in Italy in 1859, and the Franco-Mexican War between 1862 and 1867. In parallel, France continued to increase its colonies in Africa with Algeria (1830-1858), Senegal (1854-1863) and the future Côte d'Ivoire (1842). In the Pacific, France conquered Tahiti (1842), and New Caledonia (1853). All these territories came to complete the former French territories in the Atlantic and in South America (Guyana).⁴⁵ Consequently, the senior officers and some junior officers who served in Tonkin already had military and colonial experience in Europe or Africa. These conflicts brought several improvements to the colonial warfare. Nevertheless, few of them participated in the retaliation operations in the 1840s which were solely led by the Navy with limited *Troupes de Marine* forces.

Therefore, the Asiatic colonial warfare really depended on few leaders who developed adjustments in Cochinchina with the Department of Indigenous Affairs

responsible for handling and supporting the direct administration of the conquered territories under the command of R.A. Louis Bonard in April 1863.⁴⁶ This period of time was rich for these officers and sometimes non-commissioned officers in charge of managing the villages and districts with the local authorities.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, this familiarity with the local customs remained in Vietnam and was hardly distributed if we consider the few publications addressing Tonkin and Indochina before 1860.

Research Questions and Methods of Analysis

The previous observations show that French officers pursued their duty and mission in those specific and unfamiliar regions without a real experience of Asia. As a result, how did French officers understand their personal and professional situation, the threats of their adversaries and the challenge that the Annamite populace posed in order to adapt their tactics and approaches of conducting conquest, then pacification of Tonkin?

Several secondary questions facilitate this investigation and address the different facets of the overarching question: firstly, what were the higher constraints affecting the military leadership? Secondly, how did they analyze, define and perceive their enemies as well as the local population? Finally, based on their own experience and understanding of the situation, what was the possible learning process and if it existed, how did they develop solutions, plans, and strategies to face those particularisms?

Assessment of the Main Sources and Resources

Conducting research about Tonkin leads to numerous sources covering the political and military aspects of French colonial expansion. The bulk of the sources are available in libraries, or online through the different services such as Google book,

French National Library or research websites. Three kinds of sources dominate: the French sources contemporary to the events (pamphlets, essays, letters, and souvenirs), the French modern sources written in the 20th century and finally the English literature (researches, thesis and pamphlets).

Two pitfalls should be avoided during the reading and kept in mind to honestly analyze the papers: the first is passion which drove some authors to defend their personal statements and on the other side, the willingness to defend their political or diplomatic views. These elements are significant and require attention to mitigate the hidden traps and biases, shortcuts and approximations in dates and data. Thus, some English writers defended the British Empire “statement” against the French adventure⁴⁸ and, on the contrary, the French politics emphasized the importance of such a position to reinforce the rank of France and its trade.⁴⁹ More recently, Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hemery, in *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954* have developed a politically engaged thesis on the French colony in which political biases misinterpreted tactics and military operations.⁵⁰ Additionally, battle stories description or personal involvements usually suffer from a lack of accuracy regarding the facts and the outcome of the victories.⁵¹ Finally, some authors used their books as support for their personal military careers and transformed the sense of the historical events.⁵²

Fortunately, some key sources clearly evaluate this period. Regarding the general background of the French colonization, Victor Piquet in *Histoire des Colonies Françaises*, published in 1931, encompasses the general facts and trends since the very beginning of the colonial expansion. Concerning the pacification of Indochina, three major documents provide the necessary narrative: Barthélémy Palat with *Les Expéditions*

Françaises au Tonkin and André Thomazi in *La Conquête de l'Indochine* (1934) for a deep and chronological analysis of the conquest. These books are based on French sources and still living actors or spectators of the military expeditions. Finally, the tactical analysis of this thesis relies on two key documents: *Guerre dans les Colonies, conférences for the French War College* by Lieutenant-colonel Ditte,⁵³ and as an after action report for the second, *Opérations Militaires au Tonkin*, by Major Chabrol.⁵⁴ Numerous others sources and books can complete these readings by providing specific studies of particular personalities (Captain Rivière, R.A. Courbet⁵⁵ and others), events (battle of Lang Son)⁵⁶ or periods, adversaries like the Chinese or Black Flag Armies⁵⁷ as well as terrain and aspects (military administration).⁵⁸

The quality and quantity of sources enable the analysis of this period of French history with enough points of view and accuracy to clarify and check the facts, figures and statements.

Conquest and Pacification of Tonkin from 1873 to 1897

Several Strategies in less than Twenty Four Years

This study really starts on 20 November 1873 when Navy Lieutenant Francis Garnier seized Hanoi, the capital of Tonkin. This event triggered the colonial infatuation for Tonkin. From this date, the Affair of Tonkin became a real political concern which tried to decide the fate by increasing the French presence and control over this region. Tonkin came to be the subject of political discord and the center of passion when Navy Captain Henri Rivière repeated Garnier's expedition in Hanoi in March 1882 and was killed few months later, on 19 May 1883 during a battle against the Black Flags. This military action generated Chinese reaction. France was consequently involved in a

conventional conflict against the Celestial Empire and spent two years repelling Chinese forces allied with local forces from Tonkin. Ten to twelve years were necessary to completely pacify Tonkin against piracy and rebellions in the region from the Delta to the mountainous areas north and west of Hanoi. Thus, 1897 marked the end of military operations and can be viewed as the very beginning of peacetime administration.

As a result, this thesis will use 1873 and 1897 as external margins. The period from 1873 to 1883 was clearly dominated by naval colonial warfare which depended on limited means which supported a “gunboat strategy” to secure and maintain the French influence upon the region and neighborhoods. During the second period running from 1883 to 1885, the French army took the lead and committed significant conventional forces to counteract, then seize Tonkin against the Yunnan forces and their indigenous allies (pirates and Annamite army). After the second treaty with China, called the Treaty of Tianjin (signed on 9 June 1885, the pacification period began and focused its effort against irregular and outlaw forces. More than a campaign, it was a military commitment to set up security and restore the social and administrative ties between the local populace and their traditional as well as colonial authorities which roughly ended in 1897.

Thesis

The conquest and pacification of Tonkin illustrated the continuity between policy and military action. In this historical frame, the French Navy and Army officers clearly understood the strategic environment and employed the military tools under political constraints, with limited resources and support from the Heartland. Like architects and craftsmen, they handled the conquest and pacification, translating the political willingness into military reality. The success of pacification greatly depended on their

ability to simultaneously understand, adapt, and operate as soldiers and civilian administrators. They believed that the overall success came from acculturation of tactics to the local challenges. This creative approach coupled with military adaptations to the cultural specificities did not come out without tensions with the political masters. Notwithstanding, the necessary trust between politics and the military forces represented the key for success and framed the colonial doctrinal approach for the future French conquests in Madagascar and Morocco under military rulers. To a certain extent, the officers were the hinge between the political masters and the local population.

Organization of the Thesis

In order to appropriately develop the analysis of this conquest, the thesis goes through the chronological description of three main periods. The first part addresses the gunboat strategy developed by the Navy and the Ministry of Marine and Colonies to handle the region and attempt to increase the French control despite the lack of political vision, limited means and weak support. The adventures of Francis Garnier in 1873 and Navy Captain Henri Rivière in 1882-1883 will serve as case studies to highlight the operational approach, tactics and the sense of initiative in absence of guidance. The second chapter talks about the conventional war against China and its local irregular and regular allies. These large scale operations demonstrate the importance of autonomy and self-sufficient for an expeditionary forces as well as the tactics of columns. Finally, the pacification experience from 1885 to 1897 establishes the real process of lessons learned following the obvious lack of efficiency of the first strategy of pacification which will lead to the oil spot strategy developed by several brilliant French officers.

¹Captain Rouyer, *Histoire militaire et politique de l'Annam et du Tonkin depuis 1799* (Paris: France: Charles Lavauzelle, 1906), 8.

²Paul Deschanel, *La Question du Tonkin* (Paris: Berger Levraud et Cie, 1883), 14.

³Twelve millions was assumed by Capitaine Rouyer (Rouyer, *Histoire militaire et politique de l'Annam et du Tonkin depuis 1799*, 256) based on personal estimations. Nevertheless, the lack of official reports did not facilitate the official estimations and the accuracy of the census.

⁴Edmond Coutois, *Etudes, observations, impressions et souvenirs* (Paris: Henri-Charles Lavauzelle, 1889), 106.

⁵Deschanel, *La Question du Tonkin*, 15.

⁶Rouyer, *Histoire militaire et politique de l'Annam et du Tonkin depuis 1799*, 8.

⁷Lieutenant-Colonel Louis de Grandmaison, *L'expansion française au Tonkin: en territoire militaire* (Paris: Plon, 1898), 9.

⁸Captain C. B. Norman, *Tonkin or France in the Far East* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1884), 16.

⁹Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, *Affaires du Tonkin, Documents Diplomatiques* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1883), xxv.

¹⁰Rouyer, *Histoire militaire et politique de l'Annam et du Tonkin depuis 1799*, 278.

¹¹*Lettrés* was the term used to describe the people recruited by exam and who possessed some knowledge regarding the law, science or literacy. They could be considered as a lower clergy responsible to handle the administration in the countryside area and small cities.

¹²Jean Chesneaux, “Stages in the Development of the Vietnam National Movement 1862-1940,” *Past and Present*, no. 7 (April 1955): 63.

¹³Deschanel, *La Question du Tonkin*, 362-364.

¹⁴Norman, *Tonkin or France in the Far East*, 22.

¹⁵Coutois, *Etudes, observations, impressions et souvenirs*, 64.

¹⁶Rouyer, *Histoire militaire et politique de l'Annam et du Tonkin depuis 1799*, 253.

¹⁷Coutois, *Etudes, observations, impressions et souvenirs*, 189, 68.

¹⁸Rouyer, *Histoire militaire et politique de l'Annam et du Tonkin depuis 1799*, 255.

¹⁹André Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine* (Paris: Payot, 1934), 201.

²⁰Leon Deschamps, *Histoire Sommaire de la Colonisation Française* (Paris, Librairie Classique Fernand Nathan, 1894), 18.

²¹Deschamps, *Histoire Sommaire de la Colonisation Française*, 21.

²²William Stearns Davis, *A History of France from the Earliest Times to the Treaty of Versailles* (Boston, NJ: The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1919), 208 and 209.

²³Adrien Launay, *Les Missionnaires Français au Tonkin*, (Paris: Delhomme et Briguet, 1900), 5.

²⁴D.R. SarDesai, *Vietnam, the struggle for National Identity* (Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 1992), 31.

²⁵Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 11.

²⁶Ibid., *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 31.

²⁷Frédéric Mantienne, *Monseigneur Pigneau de Béhaine* (Paris: Editions Eglises d'Asie, 1999), 99.

²⁸Grandmaison, *L'expansion française au Tonkin: en territoire militaire*, 10.

²⁹Paul Gaffarel, *La conquête de l'Algérie, jusqu'à la prise de Constantine* (Paris: Librairie de Firmin-Didot et Cie, 1888), 70.

³⁰SarDesai, *Vietnam, the struggle for National Identity*, 31.

³¹Victor Piquet, *Histoire des Colonies Françaises* (Paris: Payot, 1931), 263.

³²Deschamps, *Histoire Sommaire de la Colonisation Française*, 59 and SarDesai, *Vietnam, the struggle for National Identity*, 34.

³³Virginia Thompson, "Indo-china – France Great Stake in the Far East," *Far Eastern Survey* 6, no. 2 (January 1937): 24.

³⁴Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 79.

³⁵J. Kim Munholland, “Collaboration Strategy and the French Pacification of Tonkin, 1885-1897,” *The Historical Journal* 24, no. 3 (September 1981): 81; Stephen H. Roberts, *History of French Colonial Policy (1870-1925)* (Westminster: P.S.W. King and Son, 1929), 421.

³⁶Michael G Vann, “Teaching Colonialism in World History: The Case of French Indochina,” Western Society for French History’s annual meeting in Quebec, Canada (October 2008), 24; Piquet, *Histoire des Colonies Françaises*, 265; Roberts, *History of French Colonial Policy (1870-1925)*, 421.

³⁷Thompson, “Indo-china – France Great Stake in the Far East,” *Far Eastern Survey*, 15.

³⁸SarDesai, *Vietnam, the struggle for National Identity*, 35.

³⁹Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 69.

⁴⁰Edouard Detaille and Jules Richard, *L'Armée Française, Tome II* (Paris: D.M.P. Edition, 1994 (new edition)), 100.

⁴¹Detaille and Richard, *L'Armée Française, Tome II*, 102.

⁴²Detaille and Richard, *L'Armée Française, Tome II*, 101.

⁴³Douglas Porch, “Bugeaud, Gallieni, Lyautey: The Development of French Colonial Warfare,” *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to Nuclear Age* (Princeton, NJ: Peter Paret, 1986), 383.

⁴⁴Detaille and Richard, *L'Armée Française, Tome II*, 21.

⁴⁵Deschamps, *Histoire Sommaire de la Colonisation Française*, 73.

⁴⁶Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 76.

⁴⁷Ibid., 100-105.

⁴⁸Norman, *Tonkin or France in the Far East*, foreword.

⁴⁹Jules Ferry, *Le Tonkin et la Mère Patrie* (Paris, Victor Avard, 1890).

⁵⁰Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hemery. *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009).

⁵¹Rouyer, *Histoire militaire et politique de l'Annam et du Tonkin depuis 1799*, 254.

⁵²Lieutenant-Colonel de Grandmaison, *L'Expansion Française au Tonkin: en Territoire Militaire* and H. G Lyautey, *Lettres du Tonkin et de Madagascar (1894-1899)*, (Paris: Armand Collin, 1920).

⁵³Lieutenant-colonel Ditte, *Guerre dans les Colonies, Organisations – Exécution, Lectures in the French War College*, (Paris: Henri-Charles Lavauzelle, 1905).

⁵⁴Chef de Bataillon Chabrol, *Operations Militaires au Tonkin* (Paris: Henri Charles Lavauzelle, 1896).

⁵⁵Maurice Loir, *L'escadre de l'amiral Courbet* (Paris: Berget-Levrault, 1886).

⁵⁶Jean Lecomte, *Lang-Son: combats, retraite et négociations* (Paris: Henri Charles Lavauzelle, 1895).

⁵⁷Henry McAleavy, *Black Flags in Vietnam: The Story of a Chinese Intervention* (New York: X, 1968).

⁵⁸André Baratier, *L'Administration Militaire au Tonkin* (Paris: Victor Rozier, 1889).

CHAPTER 2

ADMIRAL'S GOVERNMENT–GARNIER AND RIVIÈRE'S OPERATIONS

(1871–1883)

French Navy Interventions in Tonkin

This chapter discusses the general atmosphere which surrounded the military action in Tonkin and whether this situation was comfortable or not for the officers in charge and what their freedom of action was in the field regarding politics. Following this initial analysis, the question of the officers' characters arises and draws attention to the power of influence and their understanding of the regional and international environment. Finally, according to their positions and personal perspectives, this chapter examines their tactics and the conduct of the mission, and evaluates the efficiency of their actions with respect to the strategic outcomes.

Narrative

After a short period of uncertainty and hesitation about the French position in this region, the French government decided to disregard the retrocession process in 1865.¹ Although the events of 1870 in France temporary disrupted the path and the will for colonial expansion, the French engagement seemed to have found favorable echoes among the political leaders. Since the beginning of the French presence in Indochina, several admirals had been responsible for ruling the Far East protectorate (*Cochinchina*) and French interests in the rest of the peninsula. Consequently, and following the trek by Commander Ernest Doudart de Lagrée and Navy Lieutenant Garnier which started in June 1866,² several other expeditions explored the interior to describe the economic

potential and find the route to Yunnan. In the early 1870s, Navy Captain Louis Senez reconnoitered a part of Red River and worked out the way to link the Delta with Yunnan. Garnier also stated the urgency to exploit the local potential and quickly control the region before the European competitors like the United Kingdom, Germany, and Spain.³

In 1871, Jean Dupuis, a French merchant, established a direct agreement with Chinese Marshall Mo (or Ma) to exchange weaponry for goods. He followed the Red River and met Black then Yellow Flag pirates to ensure his future commerce and find a way to Tonkin.⁴ One year later, after a short trip to France to discuss his arrangement, Dupuis set up a commercial expedition to trade with Yunnan from Indochina.⁵ Despite the official Chinese agreement, the approval of Court of Hué, and the unofficial support of Rear-Admiral Dupré, *Résident Général* in Saigon, the first of Dupuis's commercial boats were blocked in Hanoi by the local mandarins.⁶ Dupuis's second in command, Mr. Ernest Millot called for French local authorities to settle the incident.⁷ In order to save the Tu-Duc's sensibility (Emperor of Annam), R. A. Dupré officially sent Francis Garnier to investigate the case and calm the tensions. However, the real purpose of the mission was to take advantage of the chaos for establishing a permanent settlement to use the Red River as a commercial way.⁸ In November 1873, Garnier seized the citadel of Hanoi and the Delta region before being killed by Black Flag pirates. Following his death, Navy lieutenant Philastre led the negotiations with Annam and obtained the treaty signed by Tu Duc in March 1874. In exchange for Dupuis's and French troop evacuation from Tonkin and a French military support to the Court of Hué, France kept three commercial harbors (Haiphong, Hanoi and Qui Nhon) in Tonkin, obtained free access to the Red River and installed consuls in the main harbors protected by no more than one hundred soldiers.⁹

Between the two expeditions in Tonkin, France kept on implementing its assimilation policy with the local people living in Cochinchina and reinforced its influence through a policy of assimilation of the indigenous people.¹⁰ Meanwhile, in the north of the peninsula, China and Annam were reluctant to follow the agreement and conducted long-lasting discussions about the treaty. Rear-Admiral Laffont, governor of Cochinchina, asserted in 1877: “Any affairs give rise to endless discussions, and a word given one day is contradicted with impunity the next day. The Court of Hué only professes against us feelings of deep hatred, and it is retained in their expression by the fear and the memory of the disasters of 1858 to 1863.”¹¹

Annam played a double game and called for the Black Flags’ support to deal with insecurity in the mountain areas. As a consequence of this request, the Black Flags set their stronghold in Laokay and developed their area of control and influence on the Red River.¹² In addition to this threat, Hué instigated rebellion against French presence through Prince Hoang-Khe-Vien’s troops¹³ and received the support of Mandarins who tried to delay every French expeditions or trade operations.¹⁴ Although Annam was independent, Tu Duc still recognized their traditional vassalage to China and continued to pay tribute.¹⁵ Moreover, China secretly sent troops into Tonkin to secure their neighboring area and support the Black Flags.¹⁶ Finally, through a delaying diplomacy between French authorities and Marquise Tseng, its ministry in Europe, the Celestial Empire dragged on and on the discussions about the official status of France in Annam, and on the relationship Sino-Annamite.¹⁷ As a result, the freedom of access on Red River remained ignored and several incidents occurred as in October 1881, when Mr. Coutin and Villency were blocked during their expeditions on the Red River.¹⁸

After this incident, Jules Ferry, French president of council decided to intervene to force local authorities and China to fully implement the treaty.¹⁹ In fact, the French government pushed by new lobbying groups had already desired to force the protagonists to apply the different points listed in the initial agreement.²⁰ Therefore, in March 1882, Navy Captain Rivière received the order to fix the local concern.²¹ His action basically followed the same pattern used by Francis Garnier a few years earlier. After seizing Hanoi and a significant part of the Delta, he was killed by the Black Flags during a sortie.²² His death triggered a strong political response supported by public opinion.²³ This event closed the admiral's period of control and initiated the conventional approach to defeat Annamite duplicity and Chinese inference in Tonkin.

Political and Contingency Constraints versus Freedom of Action

A Lack of Durable Political Vision on Tonkin

Generally, French colonial policy suffered several changes and indecisions whether in the Far East or in Africa. This lack of clear vision impacted local policy and potentially created tensions at the governor level who inherited a confused position and orders. After the defeat of 1870 (the Franco-Prussian War), numerous politicians considered the colonial policy as a treason against the national interests and a waste of money whereas some saw colonization as an outlet after the military defeat, an exceptional opportunity to raise patriotism or avoid internal tensions.²⁴ Yet, between 1874 and 1883, the successive admirals in charge of the Ministry of the Navy and Colonies were fervent supporters of Indochina. Without success, Admiral Louis-Marie Pothuau, Minister of the Navy and Colonies, was a partisan of the hard way and called for a military conquest of Tonkin with 6,000 soldiers in 1874.²⁵ His successor, Admiral

Jean Bernard Jauréguiberry was more diplomatic but still defended the expansion as well as the admirals governing Cochinchina.²⁶ However, despite the continued support of the Ministry of the Navy and Colonies, the colonial debate was raging between the tenants of retrocession and expansion.

Initially, during the early 1870s, the internal French social situation (end of Commune Revolution in Paris) impeded politics to involve more troops overseas. For that reason, the French government and Ministry of the Navy and Colonies did not officially support Dupuis's project due to a lack of means.²⁷ In addition to those temporary weaknesses, the French government suffered from political instability due to the 3rd Republic constitution. Some ministries were afraid to request funds or commit troops to carry out the expansion in Tonkin. In April 1883, despite the precarious situation, Mr. Charles Lebrun, the actual Ministry of the Navy and Colonies, refused to send more reinforcements to Navy Captain Rivière for fear of being criticized by Chambers and the current Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Paul-Albert Challemel-Lacour.²⁸

Such a lack of common vision created confusion. The most dramatic part was the inconsistence of political decision. At the strategic level, notwithstanding regular Chinese provocations²⁹ and delaying diplomacy led by Marquis of Tseng, Ministry of China in Paris, the French government let China interfere in Tonkin by refusing to impose the treaty of Hanoi signed in 1874.³⁰ The diplomatic exchanges published in 1883 and 1884 highlighted the fact it was only lately, that France firmly requested the full respects of its rights over Tonkin.³¹ That left the successive *Résidents Généraux* in Saigon without a strong and clear support to affirm and defend the French positions between 1874 and

1883. Moreover, at the local level, this inconstancy also upset the French forces. On 17 January 1882, Navy Captain Rivière was tasked to move to Hanoi and set a French post at the entry of Red River. The following day, the order was cancelled by Paris.³²

Consequently, this period was not driven clearly by a common political vision regarding the future of Indochina, the position regarding China, and the ways to handle the new French territories.

Political Control and the *Résidents Généraux*

In addition to the inconstant national guidance of Paris, the *Résidents Généraux* suffered from interferences and a close supervision of their activity and responsibilities. In 1871, wire telegraphs linked the peninsula to France through the British connection in Singapore, then Calcutta and Suez Canal.³³ These modern means of communications reduced the time between Paris and Saigon where the *Résident Général* settled from sixty days (the one way trip lasted twenty-eight days) to a few minutes.³⁴ This relative proximity allowed the governors to promptly discuss with Paris the current or future operations. The numerous exchanges reported in the archives of Ministries of Navy and Foreign Affairs stressed the importance of this direct way of communication between the different parties and the powerful means of control that ministers could use to handle events in the Far East.³⁵

Usually through direct and long discussion, the *Résidents Généraux* succeeded in obtaining an official clearance to wage a military operation. Rear-Admiral Dupré (resident governor between 1871 and 1874) imposed his views about the action to take in Tonkin. On 19 May 1873, he requested the permission to support Dupuis's affair in Tonkin. Minister-Duke Albert de Broglie refused. Despite this initial refusal, he decided

to put his rank at stake on 28 July 1873 to obtain the right to intervene with limited troops and commit Garnier.³⁶ Finally, the ministry approved the operation.³⁷ In the second case, Mr. Charles Le Myre de Vilers received some alarming reports from Navy Lieutenant Gros-Devaux on the Annamite reinforcement of the citadel in Hanoi and the rearming of the Black Flags piracy. He urged Paris to send troops in order to fix this embarrassing threat for France. After a long time, Paris authorized him to intervene, then in a second telegram called him off and proposed waiting for the arrival of a new rear-admiral to take the command of the French forces. Facing this humiliating situation, Mr. Le Myre de Vilers proposed his resignation. The French government finally cancelled its counter-order and accepted intervention under Mr. le Myre de Vilers's authority.³⁸ As a result, the telegraph and the different political control measures put the *Résident Général* in an uncomfortable situation.

Admirals-Governors and *Résidents Généraux* set their Own Policy

Despite constraints from Paris, Admiral-Governors and *Résidents Généraux* were generally successful and relatively free to create favorable situations to develop autonomy for their subordinates. They were indirectly helped by the particular situation in the peninsula where direct communications with the subordinate were quite impossible without the use of ships. In fact, contrary to the quick national communication, the regional communications in Indochina still depended on the mail system of civil or military shuttles between the different French ports and franchises. Therefore, the evident lack of rapid system of control let the deployed commanders reasonably free to develop their own policy in respect of the political guidance and personal interpretation of the orders. In the frame of the operation in 1882-1883, Navy Captain Rivière reported to the

R.G. Mr. Le Myre de Vilers (*Résident Général* 1879-1882) about the situation in Hanoi and explained how and why he decided to seize the citadel without a clear order but within his interpretation of the French interests and honor.³⁹ He resolutely put his direct superior and Paris in front of the *fait accompli*.

Therefore, despite the fluctuating political support, the governors used to give a strategic purpose to the tactical operations led by Garnier then Rivière. Such justification for an order empowered the chiefs of operations by giving wide freedom to act and delegation of power to enforce the efficiency of troops deprived of direct communications. In both cases, Garnier and Rivière were tasked to fix the security and tactical problem within diplomatic and strategic objectives. Thus, Garnier received the mission from Rear-Admiral Dupré to officially handle Dupuis's immediate concern through a show of force.⁴⁰ The second and unofficial mission was to forestall Great Britain and Germany in opening trade on the Red River and avoid offending the Court of Hué.⁴¹ Thus Garnier received the support of three representatives sent by the emperor to help him in his action.⁴² Within this order, Garnier considered himself as free to act.⁴³ Similarly in 1883, R.G. Mr. le Myre de Vilers formally put Rivière in charge of establishing a new French strong point on the Red River for a tactical purpose and also forcing the local mandarins to expel the Chinese mercenaries and Black Flags.⁴⁴ Because the *Résident Général* was not able to join him, he ordered that Rivière could "act as he judged proper to conduct his tasks."⁴⁵ As a result, deployed commanders not only dealt with a tactical mission but they really carried out a strategic task by imposing French rules in the support of national interests.

Although relatively uncomfortable, the command relationship between the ministries and the peninsula allowed the successive *Résidents Généraux* and Navy officers to develop their personal policy in accordance with some strategic objectives as well as concrete tactical problems. This subtle game on the fence between diplomacy, politics and pure military operation demonstrates the opportunities that emerge from this kind of situation, far from the homeland and political masters. This relative freedom of action was clearly supported by a relatively deep knowledge and understanding of the cultural environment.

French Cultural Approach

With a scientific approach and the sense of curiosity, the Navy officers developed solid cultural awareness of the regional environment. In 1863, Rear-Admiral Bonnard and Vice-Admiral Pierre de La Grandière created the Department of Indigenous Affairs responsible for directly administrating districts, cities, and villages in Cochinchina and in future protectorates.⁴⁶ In addition to those administrative tasks, the department collected information and cultural facts to depict the local customs, history, language and traditions. Many of the officers who attended the course, learnt to speak and write Annamite to facilitate their integration in the population. Among them, some became famous for their impact in colonial expansion and debate: Navy commander Gabriel Aubaret who defended the retrocession before 1864 or Francis Garnier who was one of the local administrators of Cho-Len between his explorations.⁴⁷

In addition to this aspect, their dedication and huge experience as administrators of districts and cities all over the peninsula drew Rear-Admiral Dupré's attention. In February 1873, he decided to expand the concept by creating a college for the Navy

officers and Inspectors for Indigenous Affairs. The decree specified that nominations to administrative position and promotion would be submitted to attend this course. The first director was Navy Lieutenant Eliacin Luro who served under the command of Francis Garnier as deputy administrator. He defended the importance of culture and knowledge to rule the villages and cities. To support the task of his students, he wrote several courses about native justice and administration which were published in the form of book later: *Le Pays d'Annam, Etudes sur l'Organisation Politique et Sociale des Annamites*. This huge effort developed an original and unique course of Annamite culture and language. It provided a single corpus to all the officers serving in the local administration.⁴⁸ This painstaking work was completed by the historical notes and dictionary of Father Le Grand de la Liraye who provided a sharp view of the language and history of Annam.⁴⁹ Such documents served as baseline for the future inspectors and administrators. Therefore, acculturation was considered as a key element to conduct the political mission as well as ensure security.

This parallel organization ruled the daily life of natives as well as large parts of the national functions such as economy, education, justice and security.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the French protectorate and the way of ruling native people were seriously discussed among the officers serving in Cochinchina. This debate also took place among the Navy officers serving in Indochina and divided the servants into camps: those who defended assimilation and those who advocated association. So, among the officers serving in the Department of Indigenous Affairs recently settled in Saigon, some argued that direct administration of the colony was a relevant idea and others, as Navy Lieutenant Paul

Louis Philastre, that assimilation could not work with Asiatic people relying on a collective approach of the society.⁵¹

Consequently, despite a real and precise knowledge of the native population and customs, some colonial considerations emerged in the minds of the officers in charge at the regional level as well as local level. Expansion was still a sensible topic during this period of time in the colony as it was in Paris.

Actors in the Field and Battle Positions

Limited Intelligence Assets

Before describing the operations, it is necessary to examine how the French forces collected information in Tonkin. The maps were initially drawn by the missionaries and then later by the Navy officers shipping in the Far Eastern seas. British⁵² and Dutch⁵³ cartographies were widely accessible even if they were limited to the navigation activities in the Gulf of Tonkin. More specifically, the region of Delta was well known thanks to several expeditions on the Red River and trips along the coast. The basic terrain knowledge was sufficient to plan naval movement and ground operations up to Hanoi. Further north, the quality of the topographic survey relied on a few French expeditions (Dupuis, Garnier, Senez and some explorers) and on the presence of French officers in the early 18th century who served the emperor Gia Long and built or reinforced several forts according to the Vauban model or French engineering. Hence, the officers were generally familiar with the frame of the rice fields and villages around Hanoi.⁵⁴ In addition to this general knowledge, some key positions were also described and mapped as the citadel of the regional capital erected like old French forts:

It was a formidable piece of military engineering. In shape it was a square, each side being more than half-a-mile in extent. The walls were of earth reinforced by brickwork, and there were five gates surmounted by towers, two being in the south wall, and one in each of the other walls. The whole was enclosed by a wide ditch filled with water across which five bridges, one from each gateway, formed the sole means of communication. The approach to these bridges on the outer side of the ditch was in every case screened by defensive earthworks.⁵⁵

In the different reports between 1873 and 1884, the lack of intelligence about geography or topography did not come up. It is reasonable to assume that knowledge of terrain features and general descriptions were adequate to plan operations and embrace the situation of Tonkin.

At that time, the military human intelligence collection relied upon the limited navy gunboats patrolling along the coast and as of 1874, on the consul at Hué and the *chargé d'affaire* in Hanoi. These officials provided some information regarding the situation in their city and depended on word of mouth for obtaining information beyond their walls. Thus, Mr. Rheinart, *chargé d'affaire* in Hanoi, sent a complete report to the governor describing the situation and the atmosphere in Tonkin.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, although useful to represent the French interests in the region, these officials lacked contact with sources to cover the Tonkin and collect tactical information from the native people.

To remedy this weakness, French officials could fortunately rely on French missionaries integrated among the population. Despite their neutrality, the religious representatives did not forget their nationality and helped the French expeditions or operations. By doing so, they hoped to secure their parishes and isolated missions in a country where persecutions against priests and converts were common.⁵⁷ In this frame, Mgr. Paul Puginier and other French priests took a specific role through their influence over Tu Duc and the different mandarins.⁵⁸ Their wisdom was recognized even if

weakness in security led to some retaliation or persecutions. Therefore, whatever their faith, Rear-Admiral Dupré, Mr. Le Myre de Vilars and Navy Captain Rivière, although atheist, used the service offered by Mgr. Puginier.⁵⁹ While Dupuis's expedition was stopped on the Red River, the bishop tried to serve as negotiator to release the pressure on the expedition.⁶⁰ Later on, one of the French priests in Hanoi provided rich information to Rivière on the Chinese and Black Flags movements beyond Hanoi.⁶¹ Notwithstanding a relative neutrality to secure the future of their parishes, missionaries did not hesitate to support the French operations with the hope to definitively prevent Annamite persecutions.

Due to the absence of an official and reliable intelligence system, French officers were dependent on circumstantial allies and unprofessional collectors. Yet, if the general picture allowed early warning to anticipate strategic surprise at the theatre level, the lack of tactical intelligence visibly impacted the security of movement in the field. This critical vulnerability was one of the key factors of the successive failures to exploit the initial victories in the Delta.

Enemy Studies: Piracy, Chinese and Annamite Forces

France faced numerous kinds of adversaries during its early operations in Tonkin. However, the key opponents were basically organized around either political or economic issues. All saw France as a competitor for their influence and business in the region. Despite different purposes, they acted as a whole against the French troops and severely challenged the western capabilities.

As a sovereign nation, Annam theoretically controlled Tonkin since 1802 when they conquered the region over the native Tonkineses.⁶² To defend this province, Tu Duc

committed Prince Hoang-Khe-Vien, one of his nephews, with about 4,000 to 5,000 soldiers.⁶³ Although numerous, they remained usually ill-equipped with pickets, spears, swords and some old rifles and muskets. In 1873, they were placed under the command of governor Marshall Nguyôn-Tri-Phuong, a strong opponent to French expansion and who had already faced France in Cochinchina a few years earlier.⁶⁴ After the seizure of Hanoi by Garnier, those regular troops vanished in the Tonkin and fuelled the piracy as well as the local criminality.⁶⁵ During Rivière's expedition, the citadel of Hanoi was also the central place of defense for the Annamite troops under the command of the civilian and military mandarins. Despite few accurate figures and studies about the forces present, these enemies were relatively numerous and turned around 20,000 in 1882.⁶⁶ Moreover, they were perfectly adapted to the terrain and environment. Their main flaws were the lack of discipline, combat spirit and popular support.

France's strongest opponents were the Black Flags who controlled a large part of the Tonkin with the Chinese and Annamite tacit and indirect support.⁶⁷ In the early 1860s, these pirates operated in China for a Muslim rebellion against the Chinese authority.⁶⁸ After the collapse of the Taiping rebellion in Guangxi (Kuang Xi), Liu Yung Fu, a fine tactician and respected chief moved to the mountainous region on the border between China and Tonkin.⁶⁹ With about 7,000 soldiers, he taxed a significant part of the traffic on the Red River from this remote area and his stronghold, Lao Kay.⁷⁰ Moreover, he succeeded in expelling the local rebels, known as *montagnards*, and put away the other competitors, called Yellow Flags.⁷¹ These successive acts allowed the Black Flags to appear as the defenders of unity in Tonkin and credible regarding the Chinese authority. They progressively increased their area of action from the upper Tonkin to the

Delta. In addition of their discipline, they obtained better equipment from western countries.⁷² Due to the security they provided in the region, they received a positive support from the population which facilitated the recruitment of troops.⁷³

Finally, France faced Chinese forces committed by Beijing to initially secure the common boundaries and then progressively pressure the limited French forces. To fuel the diplomatic crisis between France and China, the Chinese emperor ordered troops moved from Yunnan and Guangxi (Kuang Xi). They crossed the border between February and April 1882. They also coordinated their action with Black Flags to screen their movements.⁷⁴ Consequently, even if the enemy consisted of several kinds of forces, they recognized each other and coordinated their action to achieve their own agenda.

Limited French Forces

On the other side, French troops in Indochina were limited to the Navy elements of the Naval Division, supported by *Marsouins* and some additional assets as engineers, gunners, topographers and doctors. In 1867, a total of 6,000 sailors and *Marsouins* served in the peninsula. Later, in 1881, the official reports described 3,614 French sailors and soldiers, 696 *tirailleurs tonkinois* (Tonkinese skirmishers) and 3,709 militiamen.⁷⁵ They mainly operated in Cochinchina and only a few of them could be committed for external missions.

To project the forces, sustain the troops and provide support, the French Navy employed gunboats equipped with some small and medium guns. They also served as river task forces to screen the canal and meander in the Delta. In addition to these tasks, navy officers employed junks to transport soldiers from point to point. Finally, the gunboats served as mail shuttles to Saigon bringing reports and orders. They were vital to

support the ground forces, prevent enemy movement in the Delta and create threats on flank areas.⁷⁶

Table 1. Table of Personnel in 1873

	Navy Lieutenant Garnier	Annamite Marshal Nguyôn-Tri-Phuong	Black Flags
Total	About 200 soldiers	More than 3,000	More than 7,000
Navy assets	2 gunboats (<i>Scorpion / Espingole</i>) 1 sloop	Few junks for transportation	Few junks for transportation
Ground assets	1 <i>Troupe de Marine</i> platoon (30 soldiers)	N/A	N/A
	1 debarkation navy company (56 sailors)	N/A	N/A
	1 gun of 5 and 4 of 1 ½ (20 gunners)	Older guns in the citadel	N/A
	No engineer, one doctor	N/A	N/A
Others troops	Dupuis's forces (about 100 mercenaries)	Unknown	N/A

Source: Created by author, data from André Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine* (Paris: Payot, 1934), 117.

A quick analysis of the Garnier and Rivière 'expeditions highlights the disproportion between the strategic mission they received and the very limited means they got to carry out their tasks. For Garnier and Rivière, this workforce did not reach one thousand soldiers in Hanoi. Garnier refused more than a small number of troops to remain credible as a negotiator.⁷⁷ Later in 1883, Rivière requested one thousand soldiers to expand his operations and seize the strategic key terrain in the Delta of Tonkin.⁷⁸ Both agreed about the strength and efficiency of small contingents. They relied on professional troops equipped with modern equipment and commanded with discipline and ardor to overwhelm the enemy defense.⁷⁹

Table 2. Table of Personnel in 1882-1883

	Navy Captain Rivière	Annamite	Black Flags	Chinese Forces
Total	Initially 400 then 800 soldiers	620 militiamen in Hanoi		
Navy assets	1 cruiser 8 gunboats 2 sloops	N/A		
Ground assets	2 then 4 <i>Troupe de Marine</i> companies	N/A	More than 7,000	About 13,000
	1 debarkation platoon	N/A		
	½ mountain battery	4 guns		
	Engineer, one doctor	N/A		
Additional troops	1 Annamite platoon	3,000 to 4,000 soldiers in Delta		
Reinforcement	1 battalion 3 debarkation Coys	Local militias and pirates in the Delta		

Sources: Created by author, data from Charles Baude de Maurceley, *Le Commandant Rivière et l'expédition au Tonkin* (Paris, Paul Ollendorff, 1884), 120, 157; Pei-chih Hseih, "Diplomacy of the Sino-French War: 1883-1885" (dissertation presented to the University of Pennsylvania, 1868), 91; X de P, "Souvenirs du Tonkin" in *Revue du Cercle Militaire* (Paris, Paul Dupont, 21 January 1894, 1st semester 1894), 92.

Strength Ratio Advantage

The strength ratio was clearly in favor of native troops since they knew the terrain and already occupied the key positions either in Hanoi or in the vicinity of the city. Nevertheless, the difference in number masks the real difference respecting the basic equipment and weapon. In this frame, the presence of gunboats equipped with guns and served by professional gunners clearly changed the parity. Moreover, the French gunnery employed for the first time explosive ordnance which scared the enemy defenders in the citadel.⁸⁰ The technological edge coupled with professionalism filled the gap between the overwhelming enemy forces and limited French contingent.

Combat operations

Both operations presented similarities regarding the timeline, tactics and outcomes to the point that Henry McLeavy spoke about a tragedy repeated when he noticed Rivière's action.⁸¹ They started with the deployment of forces from Cochinchina which served as a staging area about 1,000 miles south.

Diplomacy, Surprise and Swift Seizure of the Citadel

Although the Governor and mandarins were fully aware of the French presence and their military strengths in 1873 and 1882, they were surprised by the violence of the action and the strong willingness of the French leaders to seize such a symbolic position. To retain the surprise factor, Garnier expressed his disposition to peacefully solve the concerns between Dupuis and the governor. In addition, he efficiently used his cultural knowledge, requesting Hué's support and showing patience during the endless discussions.⁸² For more than one month, he encountered a real lack of sincerity and dilatory diplomacy from the mandarins. At the end, Garnier, like Rivière, put pressure on the Annamite authorities by sending clear letters and messages requesting the end of their actions.⁸³ Meanwhile, mandarins still harassed the French contingent, hurting Garnier's pride by putting up posters against France as well as reinforcing their forces in the citadel in 1882.⁸⁴ Finally, the French leaders sent a strong ultimatum to force their way, urging the native governor to cease his activities and open the citadel to the French troops. The personal experience of Garnier as a former inspector of the Department of Indigenous Affairs and Rivière coupled with their sense of national honor drove them to act on behalf of their country in respect to their guidance and mission.⁸⁵

The seizure of the citadel by limited numbers of troops appeared as a tactical challenge since the ratio was clearly in favor of the Annamite defenders who used the protection of the fort and their number to deter any action against the key position. The decision to attack surprised the defenders who believed that the French would not take the risk. Therefore, either the decision or the way of attacking clearly disrupted the Annanite defense plan through surprise and improbable action against local forces.

The maneuvers were classical in their execution. In both cases, the assault started with artillery fire from gunboats positioned in the Red River. On 20 November 1873 the firing began at 06.00 for Garnier.⁸⁶ On 26 April 1882, it began at 08.00 for Rivière.⁸⁷ To improve their attacks, Garnier as well as Rivière used a deception attack on another gate of the fort.⁸⁸ Shock, diversion and accurate shooting coupled with high explosive shells shocked the defenders and allowed Garnier to easily take possession of the citadel within one hour.⁸⁹ Later, Rivière spent three hours to capture the fort after the escape of the enemy.⁹⁰ The immediate outcome was the seizure of the key position almost intact and with all its lodgments, guns and supply. In addition to this success, the French troops suffered few losses (one killed in action in 1873 and none in 1882) and caught approximately 2,000 prisoners including some mandarins and caused 380 casualties out of the 3,000 defenders in 1873.⁹¹ Moreover, the chiefs of the opponents were neutralized: Marshall Nguyôn-Tri-Phuong was mortally wounded⁹² and in 1882, the Annamite governor decided to commit suicide to avoid shame.⁹³ Finally, the French leader decided to disarm the citadel by taking over the guns and dismantled some of the defensive systems.

Tactically speaking, the seizure of the citadel was a classic example of assault led by audacious military commanders with few troops (180 soldiers for Garnier and a few more for Rivière). Surprise, allied with a technological advantage, as well as coordination were essential to overwhelming the local troops set behind the protection of the walls and closed gates.

Exploitation: Quickly Control the Delta

In many respects, the seizure of Hanoi was essential since it controlled the regional capital. Nevertheless, Garnier as well as Rivière fully understood that their strategic success depended on prompt tactical exploitation. Consequently, they expanded the “initial gains” around Hanoi through prompt maneuvers to grab the other key positions which commanded access to the Delta. This approach relied on the bridgehead logic that arose from having few troops available. In addition, the presence of strong opponents north of the Delta, and the interests of France to forestall other European countries, forced a hastily occupation of the main harbor facilities and the coal mining region.⁹⁴

To achieve their ambitions, Garnier and then Rivière nine years later, sent troops to occupy and seize the key cities, villages and crossroads in close vicinity of Hanoi with the purpose of securing the route from Saigon and building a cordon around their stronghold. Similar to the seizure of the citadel, the strength of force was still very limited and the tactics looked like a platoon size raids. Thus, Major de Balny with one gunboat as support and a mixed company took possession of Hung Yen (23 November 1873), Phu Ly (26 November) then Hai Duong (5 December).⁹⁵ In the north, junior officers such as Navy Ensign de Hautefeuille seized Phu Tuong, Bac Ninh, Thai N'Guyen and Nin Binh with no more than a dozen *Marsouins* or sailors supported by one

gun.⁹⁶ In 1882 and then 1883, Navy captain Rivière tried to proceed in a similar way to quickly create a safe area around Hanoi. He committed troops to occupy Hongay and its coal mines as well as the southern key sites and crossroads.⁹⁷ He tried to prevent the Black Flags, Prince Hoang-Khe-Vien's mercenaries as well as Chinese forces from preparing and moving towards Son Tay (twenty miles from Hanoi), and Nam Dinh.⁹⁸ Finally, he received the order from Paris to retake Son Tay and Nam Dinh reinforced by Badens's battalion and three landing companies.⁹⁹ Nam Dinh fell on 23 March, but the enemy was still moving towards Hanoi and daily harassing French forces.¹⁰⁰ Despite a comparable pattern, the operation led by Rivière did not succeed in creating a buffer zone or an effective control of the delta. The large disadvantage of forces was temporarily compensated for by the swiftness of the action and the sense of tactics. Nevertheless, Rivière faced a stronger enemy which progressively nibbled away at his controlled area and forced him to disperse his troops over the Tonkin.

Another key aspect during the exploitation of the Delta was the difference of popular support. Indeed, to carry out this sensible period by opening the commerce on the Red River and expelling the remnant Annamite troops, Garnier received strong support from the natives and the main political party in the Delta who saw him as their best defender.¹⁰¹ In this frame, he released a message stating that France would protect the Tonkinese population with the hope to quickly reorganize the administration and police, and tackle any security concerns created by the vacuum of power. Consequently, numerous volunteers showed up to apply for civil servant or militia positions.¹⁰² Furthermore, the party *Le* rallied to the French position and provided a huge support to the limited French military assets.¹⁰³ Thus, without additional military action, numerous

towns and districts submitted themselves to the French authority.¹⁰⁴ This unexpected backing did not occur with Rivi re. In fact, after their initial support to Garnier and the withdrawal of French troops following the treaty of Saigon, they endured a great deal of repression coupled with Christian persecutions from Annam which made them reluctant to support the French presence in Tonkin.¹⁰⁵

Tragedy and Strategic Consequences

These military actions mainly relied on boldness to mitigate relative numerical inferiority. They finished as they started with the death of their leaders. In both cases, the failure of the mission partially resulted from the tragic loss of the chiefs. They were killed in action by Black Flags, one mile west of Hanoi, almost at the same place (the main road running to the village of Hoai Duc).¹⁰⁶ The tactical reasons were quite simple. In the first case, Navy Lieutenant Garnier pursued the enemy and was isolated from his own soldiers. In the second case, due to a lack of reconnaissance, Rivi re fell into an ambush and was killed by an enemy shot when he was helping an artilleryman move his gun. The personal engagement of these leaders put them at the front of their troops as they used to do in the previous assaults or operations.¹⁰⁷ After the death of their leaders, the second in command of the operation tried to save Hanoi against the Black Flags and mercenary pressure. Even if the death was not the only reason to stop the operation, they certainly created the condition either to withdraw the force or surge French forces to definitively repel the opponents from the Delta.

Sub-Conclusion: Questionable Efficiency

The Navy's control of the operations in Tonkin ended after the death of Rivière. For a long period of time, admirals tackled the colonial policy in Asia, in accordance with their personal strategy to develop the fleet, seize ports, secure sea lines and develop the French influence.¹⁰⁸ The navy officers sat at the crossroads between politics, strategy and tactics through their capacities (vessels, *Troupes De Marine*) and their control of the colonial administration (Inspector of Indigenous Affairs). Although they lacked ground forces, they established a strong and durable protectorate in Cochinchina as well as progressively weakened the Kingdom of Annam.

The second insight is provided by the impact of leadership on the operation and development of Indochina. Either in Paris or in the peninsula, the decision in the field was usually in the hands of senior officers and from time to time junior officers who played a great role in the various affairs. They clearly understood the general and local environment but suffered from the lack of support from the homeland to exploit and secure their vulnerable conquests. At the local level, they acted on behalf of French interests to compete with the other western countries and also preserve a kind of national pride. Positively, they possessed a real skill in commanding, maneuvering and coordinating their ground forces with the naval assets such as the gunboats and junks.¹⁰⁹ Unfortunately their shortfalls in crucial capabilities, the lack of tactical intelligence, the disproportionate reliance on surprise and finally the unfavorable force ratio did not allow them to achieve their goals. As a result, if surprise and boldness set the conditions for short tactical wins, the long term outcomes remained predictable regarding French capabilities and the general approach of the conquest.

As a result of these misfortunes, the strategic level decided to intervene to solve the ongoing concerns. Initially in 1874, Paris was not ready to increase its presence in the Far East and enjoined Rear-Admiral Dupré to send Navy Lieutenant Philastre and obtain a new treaty with Annam. This treaty allowed France to expand its protectorate in Cochinchina and obtain some concessions in Tonkin to facilitate the trade, secure the Catholics and eliminate any Chinese interference into the Tonkin area.¹¹⁰ Despite agreeing to these points, Annam allowed religious persecutions, interfered with the French presence in Tonkin and maintained its historic relationships with China. The strategic results were favorable regarding the French interests in the south but really injurious in the north. The roots of future conflict sprouted from the Tu Duc's complacency to apply the treaty and the lack of willingness in France to implement it due to the political debates concerning the colonial expansion. In the same way, in 1883, after the death of Navy Captain Rivière, the media released the news and called for a huge support in Tonkin.¹¹¹ Therefore, the French government shifted from a limited and diplomatic approach to a strong and determined engagement. Hence, it decided to intervene with more troops and tasked units mainly from the homeland and New Caledonia under the command of a triumvirate: Admiral Courbet, Dr. Jules Harmand and General Alexandre Bouët.¹¹² Between August and December 1883, they conquered the Delta of Tonkin and imposed a treaty called Patenôtre or Tianjin (Tien Tsin) ensuring the full withdrawal of Chinese troops and the recognition of the French protectorate.

¹Stanley R., Thomson, "France in Cochinchina: The Question of Retrocession 1862-65," *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (French Indochina August 1947): 364.

²Edouard Petit, *Francis Garnier, sa vie, ses voyages, son œuvre (1839-1874)*, Paris, Maurice Dreyfous and M. Dalsace, 1894, 95.

³X de P, “Souvenirs du Tonkin,” *Revue du Cercle Militaire*, Paris, Paul Dupont, 1st semester 1894, 66.

⁴McAlevy, *Black Flags in Vietnam: The Story of a Chinese Intervention*, 94.

⁵P, “Souvenirs du Tonkin,” *Revue du Cercle Militaire*, 66.

⁶Jean Dupuis, *La conquête du Tonkin* (Paris, Maurice Dreyfous, 1880), 31.

⁷P, “Souvenirs du Tonkin,” *Revue du Cercle Militaire*, 66.

⁸Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 113-117.

⁹Pierre Lehaucourt, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin* (Paris: Au Journal, le Spectateur Militaire, 1888), 28.

¹⁰Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 135.

¹¹Ibid., 134.

¹²McAlevy, *Black Flags in Vietnam: The Story of a Chinese Intervention*, 111.

¹³Charles Baude de Maurceley, *Le Commandant Rivière et l'expédition au Tonkin* (Paris: Paul Ollendorff, 1884), 184.

¹⁴Piquet, *Histoire des Colonies Françaises*, 267.

¹⁵Lehaucourt, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 28.

¹⁶Roberts, *History of French Colonial Policy (1870-1925)*, 425.

¹⁷Lehaucourt, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 28.

¹⁸Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 136.

¹⁹Barthélemy Edmond Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin* (Paris: Au Journal, le Spectateur Militaire, 1888), 29.

²⁰Pei-chih Hseih, “Diplomacy of the Sino-French War: 1883-1885” (dissertation presented to the University of Pennsylvania, 1868), 28.

²¹Baude de Maurceley, *Le Commandant Rivière et l'expédition au Tonkin*, 133.

²²Baude de Maurceley, *Le Commandant Rivière et l'expédition au Tonkin*, 194-210.

²³Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 158.

²⁴Roberts, *History of French Colonial Policy (1870-1925)*, 424.

²⁵Norman, *Tonkin or France in the Far East*, 170.

²⁶J. Kim Munholland, “Admiral Jauréguiberry and the French Scramble for Tonkin, 1879-83,” *French Historical Studies*, 1979, 82.

²⁷McAleavy, *Black Flags in Vietnam: The Story of a Chinese Intervention*, 113.

²⁸Baude de Maurceley, *Le Commandant Rivière et l'expédition au Tonkin*, 166.

²⁹Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, *Affaires du Tonkin, Documents Diplomatiques*, (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1883), 23.

³⁰Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 134.

³¹Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, *Affaires du Tonkin, Documents Diplomatiques*, 24.

³²Baude de Maurceley, *Le Commandant Rivière et l'expédition au Tonkin*, 105.

³³Navy Lieutenant X, “Cochinchina,” *Revue des Deux Mondes*, January 1872, 11.

³⁴Navy Lieutenant A. Gouin, Map of Tonkin (Paris: Challamel), 1885.

³⁵See the report: Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, *Affaires du Tonkin, Documents Diplomatiques 1874-1882* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale), 1882.

³⁶Hseih, *Diplomacy of the Sino-French War: 1883-1885*, 22.

³⁷Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 113.

³⁸Ibid., 138.

³⁹Baude de Maurceley, *Le Commandant Rivière et l'expédition au Tonkin*, 140.

⁴⁰P, “Souvenirs du Tonkin,” 69.

⁴¹Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 23.

⁴²Edouard Petit, *Francis Garnier, sa vie, ses voyages, son œuvre (1839-1874)* (Paris: Maurice Dreyfous and M. D'Alsace, 1894), 233.

⁴³Petit, *Francis Garnier, sa vie, ses voyages, son œuvre (1839-1874)*, 231.

⁴⁴Baude de Maurceley, *Le Commandant Rivière et l'expédition au Tonkin*, 130 and 131.

⁴⁵Ibid., 130.

⁴⁶Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hemery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 73.

⁴⁷Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 80 and Eliacin Luro, *Le Pays d'Annam, Etudes sur l'Organisation Politique et Sociale des Annamites*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1897), III.

⁴⁸Luro, *Le Pays d'Annam, Etudes sur l'Organisation Politique et Sociale des Annamites*, II to VI.

⁴⁹Father Le Grand de la Liraye, *Notes Historiques sur la Nation Annamite* (Paris: X, 1866), 1.

⁵⁰Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 100.

⁵¹Piquet, *Histoire des Colonies Françaises*, 265.

⁵²John Thornton, *Mer de Chine Occidentales*, 1699.

⁵³Joan II Blaeu, *Golfe du Tonkin*, 1677.

⁵⁴Baude de Maurceley, *Le Commandant Rivière et l'expédition au Tonkin*, 186.

⁵⁵McAleavy, *Black Flags in Vietnam: The Story of a Chinese Intervention*, 132.

⁵⁶Baude de Maurceley, *Le Commandant Rivière et l'expédition au Tonkin*, 148.

⁵⁷Adrien Launay, *Les Missionnaires Français au Tonkin* (Paris: Delhomme et Briguet, 1900), 107.

⁵⁸Launay, *Les Missionnaires Français au Tonkin*, 182.

⁵⁹Ibid., 162 and Baude de Maurceley, *Le Commandant Rivière et l'expédition au Tonkin*, 125.

⁶⁰McAleavy, *Black Flags in Vietnam: The Story of a Chinese Intervention*, 129.

⁶¹Launay, *Les Missionnaires Français au Tonkin*, 126.

⁶²Petit, *Francis Garnier, sa vie, ses voyages, son œuvre (1839-1874)*, 222.

⁶³These figures are relatively weak comparing to the numerous documents found by the author. Nevertheless, Captain Rouyer is one of the only professional who studied the Garnier's expedition without passion or personal connection with the famous actor.

⁶⁴Petit, *Francis Garnier, sa vie, ses voyages, son œuvre (1839-1874)*, 240.

⁶⁵Rouyer, *Histoire militaire et politique de l'Annam et du Tonkin depuis 1799*, 286.

⁶⁶P, 'Souvenirs du Tonkin', *Revue du Cercle Militaire*, 93.

⁶⁷McAlevy, *Black Flags in Vietnam: The Story of a Chinese Intervention*, 106 and 108; Launay, *Les Missionnaires Français au Tonkin*, 183.

⁶⁸SarDesai, *Vietnam, the Struggle for National Identity*, 39.

⁶⁹McAlevy, *Black Flags in Vietnam: The Story of a Chinese Intervention*, 106.

⁷⁰House of Parliament, *Correspondence respecting the State of Affairs in China* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1885), 29.

⁷¹McAlevy, *Black Flags in Vietnam: The Story of a Chinese Intervention*, 108.

⁷²Baude de Maurceley, *Le Commandant Rivière et l'expédition au Tonkin*, 147.

⁷³Roberts, *History of French Colonial Policy (1870-1925)*, 425.

⁷⁴Hseih, *Diplomacy of the Sino-French War: 1883-1885*, 87.

⁷⁵Charles Lemire, *L'Indochine, Cochinchine Francaise, Royaume de Cambodge, Royaume d'Annam et Tonkin* (Paris: Challamel Ainée, 1884), 22.

⁷⁶Baude de Maurceley, *Le Commandant Rivière et l'expédition au Tonkin*, 147 and 158.

⁷⁷Petit, *Francis Garnier, sa vie, ses voyages, son œuvre (1839-1874)*, 247.

⁷⁸Baude de Maurceley, *Le Commandant Rivière et l'expédition au Tonkin*, 148.

⁷⁹Petit, *Francis Garnier, sa vie, ses voyages, son œuvre (1839-1874)*, 243.

⁸⁰Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 25.

⁸¹ McAleavy, *Black Flags in Vietnam: The Story of a Chinese Intervention*, 189.

⁸² Thomazi., *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 117.

⁸³ Petit, *Francis Garnier, sa vie, ses voyages, son œuvre (1839-1874)*, 244; Baude de Maurceley, *Le Commandant Rivière et l'expédition au Tonkin*, 137.

⁸⁴ Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 25; Baude de Maurceley, *Le Commandant Rivière et l'expédition au Tonkin*, 138.

⁸⁵ Petit, *Francis Garnier, sa vie, ses voyages, son œuvre (1839-1874)*, 248; Baude de Maurceley, *Le Commandant Rivière et l'expédition au Tonkin*, 140.

⁸⁶ Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 25.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁸⁸ Petit, *Francis Garnier, sa vie, ses voyages, son œuvre (1839-1874)*, 247.

⁸⁹ Launay, *Les Missionnaires Français au Tonkin*, 164.

⁹⁰ P, ‘Souvenirs du Tonkin’ in *Revue du Cercle Militaire*, 92.

⁹¹ Ibid., 92.

⁹² Petit, *Francis Garnier, sa vie, ses voyages, son œuvre (1839-1874)*, 247.

⁹³ Baude de Maurceley, *Le Commandant Rivière et l'expédition au Tonkin*, 146.

⁹⁴ Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 149.

⁹⁵ Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 26.

⁹⁶ Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 125.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 149.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 147.

⁹⁹ Baude de Maurceley, *Le Commandant Rivière et l'expédition au Tonkin*, 157.

¹⁰⁰ P, ‘Souvenirs du Tonkin’ in *Revue du Cercle Militaire*, 93.

¹⁰¹ Piquet, *Histoire des Colonies Françaises*, 266.

¹⁰² P, ‘Souvenirs du Tonkin’ in *Revue du Cercle Militaire*, 69.

¹⁰³Petit, *Francis Garnier, sa vie, ses voyages, son œuvre (1839-1874)*, 249.

¹⁰⁴P, ‘Souvenirs du Tonkin’ in *Revue du Cercle Militaire*, 70.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 92.

¹⁰⁶Gouin, Map of Tonkin.

¹⁰⁷Baude de Maurceley, *Le Commandant Rivière et l’expédition au Tonkin*, 157.

¹⁰⁸Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954*, 21.

¹⁰⁹Baude de Maurceley, *Le Commandant Rivière et l’expédition au Tonkin*, 147.

¹¹⁰Launay, *Les Missionnaires Français au Tonkin*, 172; Brocheux and Hemery. *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954*, 29.

¹¹¹Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 159.

¹¹²Grandmaison, *L'Expansion Française au Tonkin: en Territoire Militaire*, 24.

CHAPTER 3

CONVENTIONAL CONFLICT WITH ANNAM, CHINA AND BLACK FLAGS

(1883-1885)

Conventional Intervention Led by the Army

For two years, France committed its expeditionary contingent to defeat the local forces supported by Chinese armies. This conventional conflict was planned and conducted as a conventional war between two camps. Although the military leadership clearly understood the geographical and military challenges to defeat the opposing forces, few efforts were dedicated to analyze and interact with the local population. As a result, despite a close synchronization between diplomacy and military actions to limit the war with China and obtain a complete victory, no actions were planned to counter-act the nascent rebellion and insurgency. In a certain way, the French officers were blind regarding the cultural problems and focused their action on what they considered as the main enemy forces believing that victory over China and Black Flags allowed the full conquest of Tonkin. The tactical and operational adaptation greatly increased the military tools but did not prevent piracy and insurgency from preparing the post-war opposition.

Narrative

Following Captain Rivière's death and pushed by public opinion and the media, the French Government decided to firmly intervene in Tonkin. The Parliament voted the budget and reinforcements on 30 May 1883 by a large majority.¹ Several days later, Tu Duc, the King of Annam died. This event started a period of political instability while several kings and regents fought over the Annamite throne. France took this opportunity

to put pressure on the Annamites. They conducted several military shows of force in Hué while the French fleet bombarded the forts of Thuan An on 20 August 1883.

Consequently on 25 August, France obtained a treaty from Annam which recognized the sovereignty of France over Tonkin. “The protectorate treaty of 6 June 1884 was the first act to submit the authority of the Vietnamese monarchy to French power. Under the terms of this treaty, the Vietnamese king surrendered the control of his foreign policy and his armed forces to France, the protecting nation.”² However, the Annam court sent a memorandum to call for Chinese support.³ Furthermore, China refused to accept this agreement according to its traditional rights and sent a clear protestation to the French government through its ambassador.⁴

These events opened the first period of French military operations which ran until the Treaty of Tianjin (Tien Tsin) with China on 11 May 1884, and the treaty of Hué signed on 6 June 1884.⁵ During this period, French troops under R.A. Courbet and General Charles-Théodore Millot’s command operated mainly in the Delta and successfully beat the Chinese, pirates and insurgent forces. The territory under French control progressively increased from the thinner line between the sea and Hanoi to the northern and eastern limits of the delta. Despite the victories of Son Tay (16 December) and Bac Ninh in March 1884, the regions of the hills and mountains surrounding the flat region still remained under Black Flags and Chinese control. Yet pressure by the French operations close to its south-west boundaries, China finally agreed to sign a treaty recognizing the sovereignty of France over Tonkin. This treaty was followed by the treaty with Annam few weeks later.

Although the agreements allowed several weeks for the withdrawal of the Chinese forces, an incident occurred in Bac Lé between a French column and Chinese outposts on 23 June 1884. Seen as an ambush in France, this defeat set the pace for a second and wider conflict with China. As a result, the French Government called for retaliations to punish China.⁶ Jules Ferry requested the full implementation of the last treaties and claimed huge reparations (250 million French francs). China refused and started to move forces against the French positions in the Delta. To support the French ultimatum, R.A. Courbet received the order to seize some assets as guarantees. He sank a significant part of the Chinese fleet at Fou Tchou on 22 and 23 August 1884.⁷ Later he blocked the trade from Formosa (30 October 1884) and seized the Pescadores Islands (29 to 31 March 1885).⁸ In Tonkin, the French troops initially blocked the coordinated advance of Chinese and Black Flags forces. Afterwards, thanks to numerous reinforcements, Generals de Brière de l'Isle and de Négrier conquered the Delta (Lap on 6 and 7 October, Kep on 8 October, and Chu on 10 October 1884), and its direct approaches up to Lang-Son in the east and the foothills of the mountain area in the north.⁹ Despite a hasty French retreat on 30 March 1885 in Lang Son and the fall of Ferry's government, China and France signed the second Tianjin (Tien Tsin) agreement on 9 June 1885.¹⁰

Close Political Control

Diplomacy and Policy Framed the Military Operations

Several reasons forced the governments to wage a limited war and closely handle the military and diplomatic operations in Tonkin and against China. In the field, the generals and admirals felt this pressure which occasionally accelerated or reduced the pace of the military actions in the field. To a certain point, the government conducted its

policy to balance the international and internal pressures, the critics of the press and above all to prevent an escalation of violence with China. Therefore, the military forces were principally used as a political tool to obtain territorial guarantees and facilitate the negotiations process.

As a whole the period from May 1883 to March 1885 was marked by a part of passion within the political affairs. Initially, Captain Rivière's death on 19 May 1883, created a real emotional crisis relayed by different newspapers and among the different chambers of the French Parliament. On 30 May 1883, a large majority voted 5.5 million French Francs credit and the reinforcement of more than three thousands soldiers from France, Algeria and New Caledonia.¹¹ Tonkin was clearly a hot topic of the political debate. Later, after the Bac Lé ambush, the same kind of passion headed the debate at the tribune. Accordingly, Jules Ferry did not hesitate to call for disproportionate retaliation against China.¹² Finally, just after the retreat of Lang Son, the famous newspaper *Le Temps* described this military misfortune as the Sedan of the Ferry's government.¹³ Only hours later, his government was dismissed by the defenders of the Blue Line run by Georges Clemenceau.¹⁴ These incidents also demonstrated the clear links between the colonial events and the prompt political measures taken in Paris soon after the military disasters.

The second factor affecting French decisions was international intervention in the crisis. Great Britain and even Germany interfered to limit the negative effects of the French military operations against the Chinese. In fact, this external pressure restrained the extension of the rice embargo to Formosa. Additionally, Great Britain facilitated the resolution of the crisis through the intervention of its ambassador, Mr. Kevin Campbell.¹⁵

Both factors framed the political guidance given to the commanders in the field and at sea.

Lack of Stability in Strategy

This period suffered from an endless debate at the strategic level between the goals, the means, and the ways to achieve the policy. By the treaty of 25 August 1883, France assumed responsibility for controlling Tonkin and defeating the Black Flags' piracy. However the few French forces available at that time were not able to secure more than the Delta. Albeit the generals aspired to do more; they reported several times that their troops could not defeat the numerous pirate gangs and the Chinese troops settled in the mountains.¹⁶ To solve this dilemma, one camp proposed to control only the useful Tonkin, called "the Tonkin where we eat" limited to the Delta and its main rivers which represented the core of the economic production and trade.¹⁷ On the other side, some advocated that the conquest had to be complete to prevent the creation of safe havens. In Paris, this debate raged between and within the ministries. In this frame, General Jean Baptiste Camponon, the minister of war, tried to delay the offensive beyond the Delta in 1884. He thought that the conditions for success were not completed.¹⁸ He finally resigned after a virulent debate at the Parliament. Nevertheless, his resignation forced the government and his successor (General Jules Lewal) to consider the vote for a reinforcement in order to seize and control the entire Tonkin.¹⁹ As a matter of fact, the ground and naval operations were tightly controlled by Paris. Consequently, and according to the political majority, several actions were delayed.

At the regional level, to implement the national policy, the government regularly appointed all high ranking officers acting in Tonkin or at sea. Even if this process was

quite normal regarding the *Résidents Généraux* and civil servants, they decided to enlarge the nomination to the main services. The reason was the desire to balance the power between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of the Navy and Colonies, and the Ministry of War which wanted to take control of the operations since it represented the majority of the contingent. In 1883, the triumvirate composed of Doctor Harmand as the *Résident Général*, Brigadier General Bouët and R.A. Courbet was established with the mission to consolidate the control over the territory and monitor the close ties between Hué and China.²⁰ Each one reported to his own chain of command which increased the tensions between them.²¹ Unfortunately for the different commanders, the problems of characters and subordinations to the different ministers disrupted the indispensable coordination of action in the field. After several months of discord, the triumvirate was finally dissolved: General Bouët asked to return to France and Dr. Harmand was recalled on 27 October 1883.²² More time was needed before there was a real stability for the local authorities was obtained. In fact, even if R.A. Courbet and General Millot successively took the lead of the operations, robust stability only happened while General Brière de l'Isle and Mr. Victor Lemaire led the troops and the administration after 8 September 1884.²³ The political grip on the men served as a tool to avoid the past mistakes which occurred before May 1883 and also to influence the diplomatic negotiations.

Political Control on the Military Action

Technically, the beginning of these military operations marked the end of freedom of action for the ground and navy commanders since henceforth the telegraph linked the naval forces as well as the main command posts in Tonkin through Hanoi or the maritime

station.²⁴ This technology reduced the time between the order and the action, and also between the action and the report. At sea, Rear-Admiral Courbet received directly the orders to sail to the arsenal of Fou Tchou to put pressure on China when Paris issued an ultimatum requiring the full recognition of the French protectorate, the withdrawal of all celestial kingdom troops, and 250 million of French francs. After several days, a second order required him to destroy the facilities and blockade in the Chinese fleet he had blocked. This operation was successfully conducted on 23 and 24 August 1883 with numerous European navy ships as witnesses. Afterwards, the French fleet was committed to undertake other offensive operations at Formosa and carry out a naval embargo of the rice trade.²⁵

In Tonkin, the ground operations bore the same political control regarding their objectives and timeline since the telegraph directly reached the command posts of generals in the field through the optical telegraph. Consequently, Hanoi was no longer cut from Paris. From September to December 1883, in order to enforce their ultimatum and pressure against China, the government urged General Bouët and R.A. Courbet to quickly move their troops and seize key cities in the Delta. Later in March 1885, it also required them to seize Lang-Chau to support the ongoing negotiations with China.²⁶

Detailed orders, constraints and timelines certainly limited the freedom of action of the senior officers during the conflict. However, contrary to the preceding period, diplomacy at the political level and use of forces were tied to achieve the objectives within Tonkin and to carefully avoid a major conflict. In a certain way, this conflict better expressed the characteristics of a limited war.

A New Hostile Situation

An Enemy with Multiple Faces

The Annamite Opposition

Despite the military and political pressure imposed by France, and the lack of solidity at the head of the Kingdom, the opposition of Hué remained a challenge.

On 17 July 1883, the emperor Tu Duc died. Even if an old and resilient enemy of France disappeared, the successive kings and regents kept on disturbing the diplomatic relationships between the French *Résident Général* and the Kingdom of Annam. In parallel, several coup d'état happened, and the political masters were either too weak or too reluctant to implement the different agreements and treaties.

The treaties *Harmand* in August 1883 and *Patenôtre*, in June 1884, barely fixed the protectorate over Tonkin and only succeeded in officially ending the ties of suzerainty to China.²⁷ Despite all these efforts, the Kingdom of Annam continued to rely on China to recover its full sovereignty. In doing so and until the treaty *Patenôtre*, the Annamite forces reinforced the Chinese armies in place in Tonkin. In Son Tay, they deployed together under the command of Prince Hoang-Khe-Vien and defended the position against the French assault in December 1883.²⁸ Even if the main forces were constituted by the Chinese and Black Flags units, the Annamite troops participated in the military actions and strengthened the main enemy actions.

The Piracy

Several kinds of piracy operated in and around the vicinity of Tonkin. At sea, there was maritime piracy of smuggling and small criminal operations. This did not really affect the French operations.²⁹ The real threat was in the rolling terrain and the mountains

surrounding the Delta where French troops were stationed. The goal of the Black Flags was to control the trade on the Red River from the city of Lao Kay in the north. After initial operations against the French, they progressively increased their forces and credibility regarding the Kingdom of Annam and China. In this respect, their chief, Liu Yung Fu, was nominated lieutenant-general in the Chinese army and received the order to recover the lost territories in Tonkin.³⁰

The most accurate estimation of the forces was approximately around 15,000 pirates.³¹ According to numerous reports, their organization was close to a regular army with a strong hierarchy. Additionally, thanks to their profits and external support, they adopted a common uniform (light blue long skirt and trousers, and a large straw hat) and bought some modern British and German rifles.³² Operationally, they demonstrated a great ability to move and maneuver from their safe areas to the French positions. At the tactical level, they complimented their bravery by additional skills including siegework and defensive operations. In Tuyen Quan, from December 1884 to February 1885, they dug numerous trenches to approach the line of defense, and employed mines and counter-mines which progressively reduced the French perimeter. Inopportunely, they also perpetuated some incorrect behaviors with prisoners and dead bodies. They used torture and mutilated the French soldiers to create terror and obtain cash rewards from their chiefs.³³

Some others groups of pirates operated and smuggled in the upper Tonkin but they did not play a relevant role during this period. They usually dealt with the trafficking of drugs especially opium, and females between China and Tonkin.³⁴ They did not have close relationships with the resistance or the Black Flags.³⁵

The Chinese Forces

The last but the main enemy the French troops faced was the Chinese forces organized in two provincial armies. The northern army came from Yunnan and the eastern from the province of Guangxi (Kuang Xi).³⁶ General Brière de l'Isle estimated them at 12,000 soldiers when he started operations in October 1884.³⁷ With the Black Flags, they occupied the north of Tonkin and also the eastern bank of the Delta down to the foothills and rice fields. Their equipment was becoming more modern and relatively efficient with the distribution of numerous British and German rifles. Furthermore, they deployed some mountain artillery guns manufactured by German companies such as Krupp.³⁸ Although they were usually described by French officers as individually valorous and well organized in the field, they suffered from “poor leadership and tactically rigidity” which limited their capacity to react quickly during the battles and surprise the French troops at the operational level.³⁹

As a whole, the French contingent faced disparate enemies offering several kinds of challenges: better adaptation to the climate and terrain, knowledge of the battlefield, and finally their aptitude to match the European weapons equipment in quantity and quality. Even the French officers acknowledged the value and ability of their enemies to conduct large operations against their troops.⁴⁰

French Defeat: A Unifying Factor

Even if fuelled by several kinds of interest, all unified their effort to defeat France. China saw in Tonkin one of its cultural boundaries which created a buffer against Indian influences. As a result, it positively replied to the Hué call for help.⁴¹ This mutual support between the Annamites and Chinese forces was complimented by common

operations and interests with the Black Flags which looked to expel the French from their area of interest. On the battlefield, this coordination was perceptible. On 10 December 1883, R.A. Courbet confronted a coalition made of 10,000 Chinese, 5,000 Black Flags and about 5,000 Annamites led by Prince Hoang.⁴² Later in December 1884, in Tuyen Quan, Major Marc Edmond Dominé defended his post against an army composed of Chinese forces coming from Yunnan and Black Flags commanded by the General Liu Yung Fu. From these combined operations, the role of each protagonist was becoming clear. In addition to their forces, China provided money and equipment to the Black Flags. On their side, the Annamite forces brought legitimacy although the Chinese and pirates became more and more reluctant to obey Hué and its princes.⁴³

Enemy Operations, Tactics and Technics

Due to the lack of cleared land and a limited road network, the enemy tried to progressively control Tonkin through its main roads and cities.⁴⁴ From June to September 1883, they increased the pressure on the French controlled territory. Chinese supported the Annamite forces in the Delta by sending three columns towards Hong Hao, Thai Nguyen and Bac, a few kilometers from Hanoi and the main French posts. Meanwhile the Annamite resistance started to operate in the Delta against the small French contingents patrolling in the area.⁴⁵ Their goals were to harass the French forces before any reinforcement. In this frame, the seizure of key cities commanding the access to the rural country was crucial.

To achieve this goal, the enemy relied on the defensive fortifications erected earlier by the French like Son Tay where a citadel was built according to the Vauban style.⁴⁶ Furthermore, they developed complex systems of defense along the main roads to

deny and delay the movement towards China. At the battle of An Chau and along the Mandarin Road, the Chinese forces set defensive system of bunkers, small forts, trenches, nets of bamboo and concealed positions which prevented any movement on the road.⁴⁷ Even if the Chinese defensive system collapsed due to a lack of internal organization and capacity to react, the French officers agreed on their improvement during the campaign. Lieutenant-Colonel Léon Bajolle fought from Chu to Lang-Son in February 1885 and described the Chinese system in one of his letters: “The Chinese created from the ground many fortified positions, art in which they mastered and, although ill-drawn on the terrain, represented some terrific obstacles.”⁴⁸ On 2 March 1885, at the battle of Hao Moc, the enemy defensive positions made excellent use of the terrain, mixing hedges of bamboos with low profile bunkers, forts, and the employment of rockets, mines, and deception positions. The Chinese forces and Black Flags had quickly learned the effect of French artillery against the classical defense composed of high walls of earth and trenches lacking shelters. Henceforth, they masked and more deeply dug their lines of defense to protect them from direct fires. Consequently, the French assaults suffered from numerous casualties to seize them when they faced about 20,000 foes defending the access to Tuyen Quan.⁴⁹ The enemy demonstrated its ability to apply military engineering directly on the terrain in order to defeat the French combined actions.

In addition to these military skills, the enemy employed terror to weaken French morale, particularly during sieges. These tactics aimed to create fear effects in the soldiers through skirmishing and sniping actions. In Son Tay, many French soldiers were killed or wounded by sharpshooters concealed in the trenches.⁵⁰ In Tuyen Quan, the Black Flags coupled this tactics with the psychological use of gongs and trumpets at night

to prevent the French from resting. The permanent threat of the mines dug underneath the French walls also pressured the sentinels and pickets who constantly looked for clues of sapping. Lastly, the enemy did not hesitate to start their assault at night coordinating the trigger of the mines with the infantry and the artillery to disorganize the French defenders.⁵¹ Consequently, no tactical pauses were possible during the battle.

Intelligence: Close the Gap

To a certain extent, the enemy posed a serious challenge to the conquerors. They quickly evolved to fight western professional troops. On the other side, the French suffered from a severe deficiency in the collection of intelligence at the operational level. This shortfall was amplified by the relative inexperience of the reinforcements. Despite the cultural knowledge accumulated since the first naval operations through the Department of Indigenous Affairs, the new forces arrived from Africa, New Caledonia and France with little current information. Few of them were aware about the particularisms of Tonkin and they clearly suffered from their lack of familiarity with the climate, the population, and the enemy forces.

The study of the conflict stresses also a lack of intelligence and adequate organization to handle the major regional conflict with China. France was still engaged in the planning of the war against its European rivals and more particularly the *Reich*. The current professional journal concluded that the focus on German capabilities continued to be the main duty of the Intelligence Bureau in Paris. The *Revue Militaire de l'Etranger* written by the 2nd Bureau (Military Intelligence Office) published only two articles in December 1883 broadly describing the Annam, Tonkin and Chinese armies. However, the scope of the review was limited to the main headquarters and never quoted in

personal memoires during the research. In addition, the 2nd Bureau owned only one report about the Chinese Army dated of 1882 and created by the Japanese headquarters. Surprisingly, according to the organization of the staff and command post of the Tonkin Expeditionary Corps,⁵² no intelligence service was established in 1883 or 1884, contrary to the common practice in past conflicts like Algeria and Tunisia.⁵³ As a result, the collect of information exclusively relied on spies reporting directly to the commanders for the operational intelligence like during the major campaign in December 1884.⁵⁴

If the operational level remained weak, the tactical level was more efficient. The columns used a few reconnaissance units to identify the enemy positions and roads. Usually the light infantry and the few elements of cavalry conducted scout and reconnaissance operations a few hours and kilometers ahead of the main body. Generally, the goal of reconnaissance was not to keep the operation secret but to determine the enemy deployment and set favorable conditions for the columns. The only cavalry squadron deployed in Tonkin served as a scout element throughout the campaign of Lang-Son and provided some accurate intelligence on the Chinese deployment next to the Gate of China in February 1885.⁵⁵ Sometimes the reconnaissance element contained more troops. In January 1885, the reconnaissance of the Mandarin road from Kep to Lang Son was composed of one battalion, one mountain battery and a platoon of balloonists.⁵⁶ The result of this heavy reconnaissance was the avoidance of a large skirmish against the following columns and unusually a clear picture of the opposing forces. Therefore, the incident of Bac Lé in June 1884 when the French troops were surprised by the Chinese forces remained an isolated event during this period and generally no major attacks or ambushes happened during the campaign. The reconnaissance and scout units were

appropriate to alert the columns about the closest enemy positions and the conditions of mobility. The French commanders operated in accordance with the current doctrine and tactics, but they did not try to depict the enemy positions in depth or its second echelon with their very limited reconnaissance elements.

In addition, the staff improved its knowledge with the help of the coolies and interrogation of the natives. Thanks to this information, the knowledge of the local topography, the access to the Annamite maps and the ability to move outside the Delta greatly increased. The topographers exploited the old French maps and completed their products with the local maps as well as numerous surveys carried out in the fields. Despite the difference how the data was depicted, they identified relevant conclusions about the practicability of maneuver which helped the General Brière de l'Isle when he decided to rapidly move to Tuyen Quan in order to save the garrison. This patient effort greatly facilitated the planning of the operations and movements as of late 1884.⁵⁷

Within two years the enemy combat effectiveness and the French intelligence capability increased in parallel. Even if the enemy appeared to be limited in quality, it presented a tremendous challenge due to its large number, knowledge of its own territory and challenging defensive and offensive operations. For the French officers serving in Tonkin, none of enemy appeared to be easily defeated.

French Forces: A Joint and Combined Approach

As a result of the full commitment of France to conquer Tonkin, the military leaders received numerous forces to reinforce the few naval forces in place in June 1883. The Tonkin Expeditionary Corps was formed with the ground forces and the naval assets assigned to the operation. In August 1883, 4,500 soldiers reinforced the small French

presence composed of 2,500 soldiers divided into three main positions in Tonkin (Hanoi, Haiphong, and Nam-Dinh).⁵⁸ These initial forces were followed by 2,500 at the end of September 1883. By the end of this initial effort, R.A. Courbet could rely on approximately 8,000 soldiers in addition to his fleet and the riverine boats. A few months later, in February 1884, the Parliament approved the decision to send 6,500 additional soldiers to General Millot.⁵⁹ Consequently, the French contingent topped 431 officers and 17,568 soldiers in September 1884.⁶⁰

The Expeditionary Corps was organized by the commander-in-chief around two components: the navy with a detachment directly under the command of the commander and an all-arm ground forces. The navy flotilla was initially under the command of R.A. Courbet. But according to the political order from the ministry of war, the flotilla fell under the army with seven gunboats in 1883 then twenty-two in October 1884 after the delivery of the first tropical gunboats fitted for the local rivers and reinforced with armored plates and equipped with new guns.⁶¹ In addition to this flotilla, the navy used several junks to transport troops and logistics in the Delta up to mountainous areas of Tonkin.

The ground forces received the reinforcement of numerous modern assets which improved their ability to fight and operate far from their bases. In September 1884, the contingent was mainly composed of infantry (two brigades of six regiments) supported by eight artillery batteries and their staff, three transportation companies, two engineer companies, one platoon of balloons, one half cavalry squadron, and some detachments of administration, health services, gendarmes, and optical telegraphs (see table 3). Among this force, several units came from the regular forces stationed in France, the colonial

territories (*Tirailleurs Algériens*), the *Légion Etrangère* (Foreign Legion) and *Troupes de Marines*. In addition, two regiments of *Tirailleurs Tonkinois* (Tonkinese Skirmishers) were recruited and included in the French brigades.⁶²

Table 3. French Contingent-September 1884

	Officers	Enlisted
Infantry	284	14,803
Artillery	53	1,173
Transportation and Logistics	3	139
Engineer	3	67
Balloonist	2	33
Cavalry	3	51
Administration	1	55
Medical Services	1	74
Gendarmerie	1	21
Telegraphy	4	67
Navy Detachment	60	1,026

Source: Created by author, data from Captain Jean Lecomte, *Lang-Son: Combats, retraite et négociations* (Paris: Henri Charles Lavauzelle, 1895), 42-44.

The organization of the command changed several times during the period. After Captain Rivière's death, the government assigned R.A. Courbet to lead the fleet and General Bouët to command the ground forces. When he left for France Courbet directed operation at sea and in the Delta. He was relieved in December 1883 and replaced by Lieutenant-General Charles Theodore Millot. At that time, the Ministry of War took the lead and set the pace of the operations.⁶³ After nine months, General Millot was replaced by General Louis Brière de L'Isle until 1 June 1885 when Lieutenant-General Philippe-Marie Roussel de Courcy assumed the command of the Tonkin Expeditionary Force at this point composed of two divisions.

The joint approach provided a real advantage to the French forces during the campaign. Nevertheless, some tensions appeared in the chain of command, particularly when the ground commanders directly tasked the gunboats without talking to their commander, Navy Captain Morel-Beaulieu.⁶⁴ Furthermore, and despite the clear victory of R.A. Courbet during the battle of Son Tay, some army officers criticized the tactics used by the navy officers as being reluctant to maneuver far from the gunboat artillery support and more inclined to attack on the more defended avenues.⁶⁵ However, these difficulties were limited in their effects and time. No major consequences occurred from the differences of perspectives and interests in the campaign between the services. The responsibilities between the Chinese naval theater and the Tonkin operations remained clear after the assumption of command by General Millot who received full command over the ground forces and the riverine boats. He only reinforced R.A. Courbet's fleet with some artillery and infantry units.

Operational Approach

Lines of Communication, Chokepoints and Rivers

The Chinese, like the French forces, aimed at seizing the cities controlling the access to the main roads. Both sides understood the combat as a terrain centric battlefield where the seizure of nodes and lines offered key advantages to its camp.

The terrain did not offer the opportunity to bypass the roads, tracks and rivers. Traditionally, most Annamite cities sit on the principal crossroads and along the arteries into the mountains or down to the sea. In order to counter the Chinese movements, the French generals established a policy of control of key terrain features like the bridges, fords and passes. In 1883, the campaign focused on the cities surrounding Hanoi: Son

Tay, Bac Ninh, the bridge of Sept Pagodes, and the access to harbors like Haiphong.⁶⁶

Later, in 1884, General Brière de l'Isle planned his campaign to expand the area controlled by seizing new cities and passes to the Upper Tonkin.⁶⁷ In other terms, the principle of victory was clearly linked to the city, town, stronghold, and bridges the French occupied.

In addition to the roads, the French continued to focus their action on the rivers to maintain the lines of communications and use their great advantage produced by the gunboats. This fluid axis of control remained the key factor in defeat the Chinese offensive during second half of 1884. In this case, the gunboats participated in the reconnaissance and delayed the enemy movement from Lang Son during fierce combat along the valley of Loch Nam.⁶⁸ Later, during the battle of Tuyen Quan, the Red River served as mobility corridor to quickly project 2,000 soldiers and their supports from Hanoi to loosen the enemy cordon around the garrison. This operational movement relied on nine gunboats and several junks.⁶⁹ The mobility provided by the river enabled the French to reposition quickly and delayed enemy maneuver as well as supporting assaults against enemy positions. Naval assets were basically employed as a form of security like cavalry, fire support like artillery and also transport which explains why they were usually kept in a close control by the generals.

Whatever the situation, both sides relied on the same operational approach regarding the chokepoints and the importance of controlling the lines of communication. Nevertheless, French forces took advantage by increasing their reliance on the rivers to quickly maneuver, move, support, and sustain.

The Combined Columns

In general, the French troops efficiently organized their units but initially lacked the means and techniques to ensure the coordination and synchronization of the columns to defeat the enemy due to some complicated maneuvers against the flank and depth of the enemy deployment.

Even if the naval assets provided an indisputable advantage, the ground forces applied the principle of combined columns to move and fight against the opposing forces. Thanks to the successive reinforcements, the General in Chief of the Tonkin Expeditionary Forces relied on a multitude of assets. On 3 February 1885, General de Négrier deployed two heavy columns composed of 7,186 soldiers, with twelve infantry battalions, six artillery batteries, one half cavalry squadron, several engineers, pontooners, telegraph operators, and medical platoons. These all-arms columns moved to Lang Son followed by the logistics and transports.⁷⁰ Whatever the size of the detachment, the military leaders looked for combining the infantry units with enough fire powers and logistics to be self-sufficient and able to efficiently fight far from their bases.

At the campaign level, several columns usually composed the forces involved in the plan. Contrary to the previous operations led by Garnier and Rivière, they typically operated in coordination with each other. In September 1884, during the Chinese movements down to the Delta, General Brière de l'Isle sent four columns against the main enemy axis of advance. The columns provided a great flexibility due to their assets included in the task force and ability to rapidly move on the limited and restricted corridors of mobility.⁷¹ At the operational level, the task organization of the columns seemed to be the adequate answer and form of maneuver.

However, one of the greatest challenges was to maintain the pace and synchronization between the columns to obtain the desired deception and efficiently seize the objectives assigned by the commanding officers. Through their experience, successive commanding officers tried to render the columns more and more efficient. The example of the two operations to seize Son Tay in 1883, and the complex operation of the battle of Chu in October 1884, point out the quick evolution of the column system.

The first attempts were unsuccessful and the linkage did not easily occur. On 15 August 1883, General Bouët waged an operation to seize Son Tay and secure the northern French position in the Delta. Composed of three battalions, their artillery and engineer support, reinforced by Annamite forces and gunboats on the river, they simultaneously moved to Son Tay on the main roads along the Red River and in the countryside to envelop the enemy position. Their coordinated actions initially facilitated the seizure of the bridges on the river and the forts protecting the main defense in Son Tay. Nevertheless, they failed to link the columns for the final effort and were defeated by the Black Flags and local troops.⁷²

This failure served as a lesson learned, and few months later, R.A. Courbet changed the friendly disposition of the troop and established additional measures to increase the ability of the columns to operate. The forces engaged with only two columns, but were heavily reinforced by naval assets and other combat forces. Second, the scheme of maneuver was also simplified to two columns to avoid the previous lack of coordination between the forces. Therefore, the seizure of Son Tay in December 1884 resulted more on the concentration of force and fire than on the movement and maneuver of the columns.⁷³

It was not until the arrival of Generals de Négrier and Brière de L'Isle that the full exploitation of the maneuver capability provided by the columns at the operational level happened. The uninterrupted operations of Lam, Kep and Chu in the beginning of October 1884 expressed the great ability to simultaneously operate in different enemy areas and kept the ability to facilitate the movement of the other column. During these operations three columns (Lieutenant-Colonel Donnier, Lieutenant-Colonel Defoy and Lieutenant-Colonel Servière) operated under the command of General de Négrier. The battles of Lam and Chu enabled the seizure of Kep by maintaining a permanent pressure on the enemy coupled with maneuver to the rear of the enemy lines of supply.⁷⁴ Furthermore, during the operations against Lang Son, expertise in column warfare seemed to be mastered since General de Négrier kept the enemy confused with a combination of flanking operations on the Light River and few weeks later a deception maneuver on a potential axis of advance towards Lang Son whilst the main body marched on a different axis.⁷⁵

The operational art resulted from a very pragmatic approach to using the limited French resources against a talented and mobile enemy. The use of columns met some key principles of war necessary to fight in this hostile environment and obtain a significant advantage upon the enemy: mobility thanks to the naval gunboats and junks, the use of combined arms and concentrated fire power. At the operational level, these three elements together provided the solution to maneuver and apply fire to defeat the Chinese and Black Flags forces.

Operational Difficulties and Adaptation

Terrain, Movement and Logistics

Despite some advantages, the French forces encountered numerous difficulties which limited their operational reach and effectiveness.

The first factor was the terrain which affected the movement and the logistical capability of the columns. At first the mobility suffered from the very restricted road net especially during the dry seasons which limited the navigation on the secondary rivers and in the High Tonkin. The movement toward Tuyen Quan in February and March 1885 was composed of 2,000 troops with nine gunboats and several tugboats pulling junks. Despite a prompt redeployment in the Delta, the seasonal shallow waters slowed the pace and requirement to tow the barges. Furthermore, once at shore, the ground forces opened their way by using explosives in order to use an old track to surprise the enemy in its rear and keep open the logistical route for the train. The speed was just over seven kilometers per day.⁷⁶

The second factor resulted from the reorganization and reinforcement of the Tonkin Expeditionary Corps transforming from a small logistical footprint to a strong contingent requiring a specialized and seamless logistical support. Most of the operations integrated logistical assumptions and constraints in their planning. The operations to seize Lang Son included the opening of a main supply road and an adaptive system to continue to sustain the large forces engaged in a two week fight eighty to ninety kilometers from their bases in a rolling, then mountainous terrain. Initially, Generals de Négrier and Brière de l'Isle refused to begin the operation without a clear concept of logistical support. They took the time to analyze the different options to reach Lang Son and

arrived at a tactical solution which matched the logistical needs.⁷⁷ Finally, they decided to wait three months (October 1884–January 1885) in order to prepare all the necessary elements to ensure the movement to Lang-Son from the staging area of Chu. If at the beginning of the campaigns the logistics hampered the operational capacities, its integration into the tactical movement and the corrective measures fixed the main concerns.

To mitigate these tremendous constraints, the logistical services established an adaptive and pragmatic organization to sustain the various columns based on mobility through trains, logistical intermediary bases and successive reorganization of the supply roads. The first challenge was the transportation of the rations, ammunition, and the different equipment for the engineers, artillery, telegraph, observation balloons, and others functions. Lang Son highlights the main characteristics of logistics supporting several columns. During the operational pause, the logistics under the command of Sous-Intendant of First Class de La Grandière (service of *Intendance*) organized the train with the recruitment of 7,000 coolies, their corporals and sergeants, and then the gathering of wagons, horses, and cows and mules.⁷⁸ Their functions were to carry 22 to 27 kilograms per coolie and pull the artillery wagon (2,600 collies out of the 7,000 recruits). The organization of the transports in Tonkin used numerous assets and animals coming from Algeria, New Caledonia, Hong Kong and even France.⁷⁹ However, the recruitment of the auxiliaries remained a real challenge due to the poor pay and the hard work.

During and after the operations in February 1885, Major Palle (service of transportation) led the improvement of the mule road in coordination with the engineers between Chu and Lang-Son. The profile (see appendix F) highlighted the challenges that

the transportation would face in addition to the winter weather and the numerous defiles and washes which necessitated the building of bridges. Three thousand coolies and some French troops under the command of pontooners spent one month making the road practicable for the wagons and French heavy equipment. Finally, to ensure some rest for the coolies and transport platoon, they established seven lodgings along the road. This complex system enabled the sustainment of the 7,000 soldiers deployed in the region of Lang-Son to the Delta.⁸⁰

The adaptation was the preventive and pragmatic measures to maintain the momentum during operations or avoid engaging a convoy in the middle of a battle. Basically, for the offensive operation the soldiers carried up to three days of supply in their knapsacks.⁸¹ For the defensive operation, a garrison of a fort was supposed to sustain itself for four months. However, according to the situation, the commanding officers increased the basic load for soldiers to six days, stopped the operation to resupply the troops (during the Lang-Son operation), and sent six months of supplies to the French garrison of Tuyen Quan in November 1884.⁸²

The arrival of strong contingents affected the logistical support which progressively adapted its organization to match the particularisms of operations in Tonkin. The capability of the *Intendance* to rely on the coolies, a few engineers, and transportation units enabled the combat forces to fight far from their bases and resist a siege or isolation for several months.

Weather, Health, Terrain and Capability Affects

The French forces experienced another challenge which seriously affected its ability to use all its numbers and firepower.

The primary factor was the weather and its effects on mobility and visibility. The monsoon in summer and winter weather sometimes limited visibility to a few meters. At the tactical and operational level, visibility caused the maneuvers to suffer from the lack of artillery support or ability to fully use the firepower. Numerous testimonies highlighted this fact in diaries and letters. Lieutenant Lamy's campaign pointed out the negative impacts of the fog during the battle.⁸³ Later on 11 February 1885 on a mountainous road, the rain reduced the movement of the columns and the following day, the fog limited the ability of the artillery to support the final assault on Lang-Son.⁸⁴

Indirectly, the tropical weather coupled with the terrain impacted the logistical support of French units. First, ammunition and the powder for the guns became unserviceable due to humidity, the long sea voyage from France, and their carriage in the unprotected soldier's kit. An anecdote described the challenge that the soldiers faced due to the tough terrain was with their shoes. After their initial engagements in 1883 and later in 1884, numerous reports written by General Brière de l'Isle described these logistical concerns. Consequently several prompt measures fixed these issues and allowed more equipment for the troops.⁸⁵

In addition, the tropical climate weakened the French soldiers especially during the hot and wet seasons.⁸⁶ Medical reports stressed the overwork due to tropical climate and fever.⁸⁷ The combat effectiveness of the Tonkin Expeditionary Force severely suffered from the climate with almost 5 percent of the soldiers permanently unable to fight due to malaria, dysentery and sunstrokes.⁸⁸ The official figures during the campaign estimated that more soldiers died from a tropical disease than the enemy's action.⁸⁹ However, the Military Health Service deployed its ambulance and medical stations close

to the battlefield and usually included their units in the middle of the columns to practice the basic surgery procedures in the field as well as organize the convoys to the main facilities located in Hanoi, Haiphong and Annam.⁹⁰

Despite various adaptations, the French forces still suffered from the hostile environment and terrain. At the operational level, these local characteristics decreased the western capabilities and combat strength and forced the military leadership to adapt its means as its tactics to the local constraints.

Modus Operandi

Four typical forms of maneuver describe the main characteristics of the French contingent: the offensive, the seizure of enemy position, the defense, and the security operations. Whatever the situation, the combination of fire, rapid movement, disciplined maneuver, and panache enabled the French forces to usually achieve victory during the campaign. These general descriptions are based on several offensive and defensive operations in this period.⁹¹

Offensive

The offensive usually followed a deployment facilitated by gunboats and junks. Once close to the objective, the troops landed and advanced along the river supported and screened by the gunboats.⁹² Although well executed by the troops in the Delta, they did not ensure a clear victory. In fact the opposing forces generally established articulated defensive position along the crest line and created their bunkers close to summits. This required assault on the ridge from the flank supported by strong artillery support (see appendix G).

The battle of Hao Ha on 4 February 1884 perfectly illustrated this maneuver when the artillery masked and prepared for the assault climbing the flanks of the enemy positions. The assault started once the artillery pinned down the enemy and weakened the defensive positions.⁹³ Throughout the campaign, the numerous and usually bloody assaults required *élan* to achieve their objectives. In the battle of Hao Moc in March 1885, the battalion Mahias assaulted twenty times till they seized the enemy positions. Typically, the struggle ended in furious close combat and the use of bayonet when the soldiers ran out of ammunition.⁹⁴ This fervor during the final attacks required a great deal of courage and strong cohesion as well as discipline under fire.

Defense

For the defense, the French commanders strengthened key positions by digging fortifications enlarging the defensive perimeter. In this manner, they reinforced the cities of Chu and Kep in order to prevent any enemy offensive against these key positions on the road to the Red River. The example of the strong position around Kep highlights the important work led by the Major Godart, his engineers, and local auxiliaries. The defensive position was a square of 2,000 meters, dominated by several bunkers and forts on the hills facing the road coming from Lang-Son. One battalion was sufficient to create a blocking position.⁹⁵ In Chu, the same kind of adaptation occurred. The defensive system was successful and enabled the French troops to resume their offensive three months later.

Similar to Kep, Chu and Tuyen Quan, the French relied upon the fortifications to turn them into advantages. Generally this option limited preparations and provided enough protection to defeat the enemy attempts to seize the place. From November 1884

to March 1885, Tuyen Quan succeeded in defending the French position against superior forces. This heroic defense of this isolated fort (eighty kilometers from the nearest friendly units) was clearly the result of engineering improvements around the central position and the coordination of the sectors of fire to mutually support the different advance posts.⁹⁶

In general, the defense depended on the quality of the fortifications, which perfectly complimented the dedication of the defenders, their officers, and some key characters.

Security in the Delta against the Piracy

In the opening campaigns, the French forces waged few operations to secure the Delta.⁹⁷ As the main threat remained the conventional Chinese forces and the Black Flags, the high command preferred to focus their limited resources on the conventional threat. Nevertheless, the presence of criminals and insurgents in the Delta put at risk but a limited risk according to their assessment, the lines of communication and the logistics from the port of Haiphong to Hanoi as well as operations towards Lang-Son. The numerous sources described the measures taken to handle the challenges without clearly explaining the general purpose of the missions. To address the challenges to the lines of communications, the area was divided into several military districts in which forces were allocated. In his general order issued on 20 January 1885 to secure rear area security, the General Brière de L'Isle reinforced the ground forces with a system of permanent gunboat patrols (twenty ships) assigned to the district commanders of Hanoi, Kep, Chu, Haiphong and Nam Dinh. This delegation of power significantly facilitated the control of the rivers and canals in the Delta.⁹⁸

Tactical Insights

Nevertheless, although the French forces used the combination of fire and *élan* during the assaults, no major tactical innovations came out during the campaign. Primarily, success depended on the capability to adapt to the new environment. The weather and its effects coupled with knowledge of the terrain and vegetation, affected the ability of the new units to fight effectively during their first engagements. Having prepared their troops, French military leaders relied on the coordination between the artillery and infantry to overthrow the defenders' willingness and the physical protection. The reliance on the artillery was usually successful to the point that the Chinese preferred to flee sometimes before the engagement of the infantry.⁹⁹ Consequently, the rates of ammunition were high and imposed resupply challenges during the long campaign such as February 1885 towards Lang-Son. These tactics provided a significant advantage against an enemy which usually suffered from its lack of maneuver.

Leadership: the Key of Success

Strength Ratio and Place of the Leadership

This phase of the conquest encompassed two years of operations and numerous battles. They allowed a short study of the strength ratio during the main engagements and a snapshot of the casualties per corps and categories.¹⁰⁰

Table 4. Main Battles and Strength Ratio from September 1883 to March 1885

Battles	Date	Enemy forces	French forces	Ratio
Son Tay	14-16 December 1883	20,000	5,300	4/1
Bac Ninh	12 March 1884	20,000	9,000	2/1
Kep	8 October 1884	5,000	1 bataillon (600)	7/1
Chu	10 October 1884	4,800	1 bataillon (600)	7/1
Tuyen Quan	Dec 1884-March 1885	15,000 to 20,000	593	25/1
Lang-Son	3 - 13 February 1885	10,000 to 15,000	7,200	1.5/1
Hao Moc	2 March 1885	20,000	3,000	6/1

Source: Created by author, data from, André Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine* (Paris: Payot, 1934), 177, 184, and 239; Barthélémy Edmond Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin* (Paris: Au Journal le Spectateur Militaire, 1888), 111, 118, 122, 206, 218, 220.

Despite the lack of accurate figures from China, it was possible to broadly evaluate the strength ratio throughout the main engagements (see table 4). Generally, the enemy fought with a numerical advantage. Except in the case of Tuyen Quan, all other major battles occurred when the French forces attempted to seize a position. Consequently, even if the figures were rounded up, the strength ratio benefited the Chinese forces and Black Flags forces which generally defended their positions throughout the campaign.

During the campaign, the officers paid a huge price (see table 5). They broadly constituted 2.4 percent of the total force but frequently represented more than 4.6 percent of the killed in action and 4.2 percent of the wounded.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, the junior officers were severely affected on the battlefield since the bulk of the casualties were captains and lieutenants within the infantry units.

Table 5. Main Battles and Casualties from September 1883 to March 1885

Battles	Date	Killed In Action (KIA)			Wounded In Action (WIA)		
		Officers	NCO and soldiers	% of officers/ total KIA	Officers	NCO and soldiers	% of officers/ total WIA
Son Tay	14-16 December 1883	4	83	4.6%	22	312	6.6%
Bac Ninh	12 March 1884	1	8	11.1%	2	39	4.9%
Kep	8 October 1884	1	28	3.4%	8	50	13.8%
Chu	10 October 1884	1	21	4.5%	2	89	2.2%
Tuyen Quan	Dec 1884-March 1885	2	48	4.0%	4	224	1.8%
Lang-Son	3 - 13 February 1885	2	72	2.7%	8	381	2.1%
Hao Moc	2 March 1885	6	91	6.2%	20	428	4.5%
	Total	17	351	4.6%	66	1523	4.2%

Source: Created by author, data from André Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine* (Paris: Payot, 1934), 177, 184, and 239; Barthélémy Edmond Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin* (Paris: Au Journal le Spectateur Militaire, 1888), 111, 118, 122, 206, 218, 220.

In the battle of Hao Moc in March 1885, six junior officers were killed in action and twenty others wounded. They led their platoons and companies during the assaults and it was not rare for a large number of casualties in the companies, some of which lost all their leaders. Also during this battle, Major Mahias's battalion suffered one hundred sixty four casualties out of three hundred twenty soldiers, among them three junior officers killed in action. Other companies lost nearly one third of their force after an assault.¹⁰² Occasionally, the leadership fully disappeared in action to the point that in the

combat of Thai Ho Ha on 4 February 1885, the 4th company of the 2nd Foreign Battalion lost all its officers forcing the most senior non-commissioned officer to take the command under the fire.¹⁰³

Leading Upfront and Élan

The officers carried out the main combat operations in front of their troops. The organization of the maneuver and fire relied exclusively on the discipline and guidance provided by the officer corps. This tactical approach affected the position of the leaders on the battlefield. Furthermore, the high panache and élan was generally common among the officers according to their letters and diaries.¹⁰⁴ This personal engagement explained the high exposure on the battlefield and the consequences regarding the high rate of casualties. The siege of Tuyen Quan went through numerous examples of involvement by the officers to lead risky reconnaissance, key counterattacks, and the defense in the difficult moments.¹⁰⁵

In parallel, the generals and senior officers seemed to carry out the principal reconnaissance missions, like General de Négrier on the Mandarin Road beyond Kep on 29 January 1885.¹⁰⁶ This kind of event coupled with the tenacity to win consolidated his name among the locals who gave him the nickname *Mau Len* or “Quick.”¹⁰⁷ His exposure put him at risk several times; consequently he was wounded on 28 March 1885. In addition to this the general who became one of the most famous heroes of the Foreign Legion, General Brière de l’Isle of the *Troupes de Marine* also became a part of the legend by leading the key operation from the head of the columns like the mission to liberate Tuyen Quan in February 1885. On the other side, the lack of confidence created some critical defeats. Once General de Négrier was injured, Lieutenant-Colonel Paul

Gustave Herbinger took the command and seemed to lose his self-control. He ordered the position abandoned.¹⁰⁸ The initial difficulties turned into a total disaster at the operational then strategic level.

These examples show the usual methods of commanding for the senior and junior officers. The leadership deeply contributed to the success of the maneuver by providing the necessary example to conduct the assaults and in the difficult moments in the near hopeless defense of positions.

Sub-Conclusion

This short period covered two years of action for the French contingent. The conflict looks original in its diversity and density. Clearly, the decision to commit an expeditionary force reinforced with numerous troops increased the military resources to the point that the commanders successively defeated the enemy forces. At the end of the period, France obtained a clear agreement which recognized their full authority over Tonkin.

Nevertheless, this period stressed the effects of the internal political debate upon the military actions by determining the pace of operations as well as fixing the objective. This tight control through the modern means of communication positively affected the government in case of victory but also participated in the overthrow of Ferry's government after the misfortune of Lang-Son in March 1885. Therefore, the policy of short reins for political and diplomatic reasons jeopardized the commander's ability to safely operate (first attempts to seize Son Tay) and his liberty to select the operational objective in accordance with his resources.

Even if the French forces won numerous battles, they still suffered from a lack of original approach to handle the intelligence as well as feel the ongoing issue of the national resistance and piracy in the High Tonkin. By the end of the campaign, the French contingent remained in a position of control through small units without a clear strategy to secure the population and its positions.

Finally, the adaptation of the column warfare to the specificity of the terrain and to the enemy enabled the commanders in chief to defeat the Chinese and Black Flags. In these battles, the firepower coupled with the energy of the officers disrupted the enemy defensive positions. For the combat forces, the élan, the support of the artillery (naval and ground units) and the total engagement of the infantry battalions clearly gave a huge advantage over the numerical enemy strength. In parallel, the use of logistics units empowered the columns by providing the necessary mobility and logistics to ensure the coverage of the Tonkin and maintain the operational tempo. On the other side, the economy of force and maybe a lack of clear strategy explain why the French commanders did not really consider the resistance and piracy in the Delta. This area was only controlled to allow the movement of troops and convoys on the river.

The feeling of victory by the end of this period quickly turned to face new challenges, in particular the question of strategy to shift from a conquest to a pacification campaign. Although the French politics desired the protectorate, they left the leaders in place determine the adequate answer.

¹Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954*, 40.

²Nguyễn Thê Anh, “The Vietnamese Monarchy under French Colonial Rule 1884-1945,” *Modern Asian Studies* 19, no. 1 (1985): 147.

³Hseih, “Diplomacy of the Sino-French War,” 95.

⁴Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 33.

⁵Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954*, 45.

⁶Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 45.

⁷Maurice Loir, *L'escadre de l'amiral Courbet* (Paris: Berget-Levrault, 1886), 116 to 142.

⁸Loir, *L'escadre de l'amiral Courbet*, 209 to 242 and 291 to 318.

⁹Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 206.

¹⁰Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954*, 46.

¹¹McAleavy, *Black Flags in Vietnam: The Story of a Chinese Intervention*, 211.

¹²Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 5.

¹³Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954*, 46.

¹⁴Stephen, *History of French Colonial Policy (1870-1925)*, 427.

¹⁵Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954*, 46.

¹⁶Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 166.

¹⁷McAleavy, *Black Flags in Vietnam: The Story of a Chinese Intervention*, 211 to 216.

¹⁸Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 175.

¹⁹Ibid., 162.

²⁰Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 160.

²¹Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 91.

²²Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 166.

²³Ibid., 235.

²⁴McAleavy, *Black Flags in Vietnam: The Story of a Chinese Intervention*, 250.

²⁵Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 54 to 79.

²⁶Captain Jean Lecomte, *Lang-Son: combats, retraite et négociations* (Paris: Henri Charles Lavauzelle, 1895), 380.

²⁷McAleavy, *Black Flags in Vietnam: The Story of a Chinese Intervention*, 235.

²⁸Paulin François Alexandre Vial, *Nos premières années au Tonkin* (Paris: Imprimerie et lithographie Baratier et Mollaret, 1889).

²⁹Documents Historiques, *La Piarterie au Tonkin* (Paris: Henri Charles Lavauzelle, 1891), 63.

³⁰McAleavy, *Black Flags in Vietnam: The Story of a Chinese Intervention*, 253.

³¹Colonel Robert Barr Smith, “In order to die,” *Vietnam* (February 2000): 30.

³²Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954*, 53.

³³François Joseph Lamy, *Le commandant Lamy d'après sa correspondance et ses souvenirs de campagne (1858-1900)*, (Paris: Librairie Hachette et Cie, 1903), 60; Colonel Smith, “In order to die,” 32.

³⁴Micheline Lessard, ““Cet ignoble trafic”: The Kidnaing and Sale of Vietnamese Women and Children in French Colonial Indochina, 1873–1935,” *French Colonial History* 10 (2009), 3.

³⁵Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954*, 53.

³⁶Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 209.

³⁷Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 237.

³⁸Lecomte, *Lang-Son: combats, retraite et négociations*, 31; Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 186.

³⁹Smith, “In order to die,” 32.

⁴⁰Lamy, *Le commandant Lamy d'après sa correspondance et ses souvenirs de campagne (1858-1900)*, 53.

⁴¹Smith, “In order to die,” 32.

⁴²Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 171.

⁴³McAleavy, *Black Flags in Vietnam: The Story of a Chinese Intervention*, 226.

⁴⁴This paragraph gathers the main trends and facts collected during the research. Even if *Black Flags in Vietnam: The Story of a Chinese Intervention* written by Henri McAleavy and *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin* by Barthélemy Edmond Palat, provide a very accurate picture of the enemy tactics, some relevant observations and additional analysis can be found in other books. For example *La vie militaire au Tonkin* by Captain Lecomte, *Au Tonkin* by Nicolas Hardoin, or *Notes sur la campagne du 3eme bataillon de la Legion Etrangere au Tonkin* which describe the campaign from a tactical point of view. These readings complete and support the conclusions establish in this paragraph.

⁴⁵Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 95.

⁴⁶McAleavy, *Black Flags in Vietnam: The Story of a Chinese Intervention*, 226.

⁴⁷Lecomte, *Lang-Son: combats, retraite et négociations*, 99 to 100.

⁴⁸“Les Chinois avaient hérissé le pays de ces ouvrages de fortifications où ils excellaient, et qui, quoique mal tracés, n’en constituaient pas moins des obstacles très sérieux.” Lamy, *Le commandant Lamy d'après sa correspondance et ses souvenirs de campagne (1858-1900)*, 30.

⁴⁹Lamy, *Le commandant Lamy d'après sa correspondance et ses souvenirs de campagne (1858-1900)*, 53 and Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 215.

⁵⁰McAleavy, *Black Flags in Vietnam: The Story of a Chinese Intervention*, 216.

⁵¹Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 244.

⁵²Lecomte, *Lang-Son: combats, retraite et négociations*, 34 and 41.

⁵³Lamy, *Le commandant Lamy d'après sa correspondance et ses souvenirs de campagne (1858-1900)*, 73.

⁵⁴Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 230.

⁵⁵Captain Lecomte, *Lang-Son: combats, retraite et négociations*, 371.

⁵⁶Ibid., 207.

⁵⁷Ibid., 211 to 216.

⁵⁸P, “Souvenirs du Tonkin,” *Revue du Cercle Militaire*, 112.

⁵⁹Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 168 and 182.

⁶⁰Lecomte, *Lang-Son: combats, retraite et négociations*, 44.

⁶¹Ibid., 51 and Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 95.

⁶²Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 93.

⁶³Piquet, *Histoire des Colonies Françaises*, 271.

⁶⁴Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 160.

⁶⁵P, ‘Souvenirs du Tonkin’ in *Revue du Cercle Militaire*, 134.

⁶⁶Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 95.

⁶⁷P, “Souvenirs du Tonkin,” *Revue du Cercle Militaire*, 278.

⁶⁸Lecomte, *Lang-Son: combats, retraite et négociations*, 48 and 49.

⁶⁹Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 241.

⁷⁰Ibid., 192.

⁷¹P, “Souvenirs du Tonkin,” *Revue du Cercle Militaire*, 278.

⁷²Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 164.

⁷³Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 192.

⁷⁴Lecomte, *Lang-Son: combats, retraite et négociations*, 45 to 85.

⁷⁵N. Hardoin Dick de Lonlay, *Au Tonkin (1883-1885)* (Paris: Librairie Garnier Frères, 1886), 472.

⁷⁶Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 241.

⁷⁷Dick de Lonlay, *Au Tonkin (1883-1885)*, 470; Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 175.

⁷⁸Dick de Lonlay, *Au Tonkin (1883-1885)*, 475.

⁷⁹Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 175.

⁸⁰Lecomte, *Lang-Son: combats, retraite et négociations*, 355 to 369.

⁸¹*Notes sur la campagne du 3eme bataillon de la Légion étrangère au Tonkin*, (Paris: Charles Lavauzelle, 1888), 12.

⁸²Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 175 and 225.

⁸³Lamy, *Le commandant Lamy d'après sa correspondance et ses souvenirs de campagne (1858-1900)*, 38 and 46.

⁸⁴Dick de Lonlay, *Au Tonkin (1883-1885)*, 487 and 489.

⁸⁵Lecomte, *Lang-Son: combats, retraite et négociations*, 110 and 111.

⁸⁶P, ‘Souvenirs du Tonkin’ in *Revue du Cercle Militaire*, 278.

⁸⁷Doctor-Major Charles Edouard Hocquard, *Une campagne au Tonkin*, (Paris, Hachette, 1892), 212.

⁸⁸Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 118.

⁸⁹Smith, “In order to die,” 32.

⁹⁰Doctor-Major Hocquard, *Une campagne au Tonkin*, 291 to 295.

⁹¹For the offensive, the battles of Son-Tay, Bac-Ninh, Lam, Kep, Chu, Hao Ha, and Lang-Son, as well as Tuyen Quan and Chu for the defense served as primary examples to draw the tactical conclusions. On the other side the author has used *Le commandant Lamy d'après sa correspondance et ses souvenirs de campagne (1858-1900)* by Lamy, *Au Tonkin (1883-1885)* by Dick de Lonlay, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin* by Palat, *Lang-Son: combats, retraite et négociations* by Captain Lecomte and *Notes sur la campagne du 3eme bataillon de la Légion étrangère au Tonkin*.

⁹²Lecomte, *Lang-Son: combats, retraite et négociations*, 58.

⁹³Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 193.

⁹⁴Lamy, *Le commandant Lamy d'après sa correspondance et ses souvenirs de campagne (1858-1900)*, 46 and Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 250.

⁹⁵Lecomte, *Lang-Son: combats, retraite et négociations*, 121 to 130.

⁹⁶Smith, “In order to die,” Vietnam; 32 and 33.

⁹⁷Thomazi, *La conquête de l'Indochine*, 187.

⁹⁸Captain Lecomte, *Lang-Son: combats, retraite et négociations*, 181 to 183.

⁹⁹*Notes sur la campagne du 3eme bataillon de la Légion étrangère au Tonkin*, 15.

¹⁰⁰Several sources were used to fulfill the tables and support the conclusions of the analysis. Thomazi (*La conquête de l'Indochine*), Lecomte (*Lang-Son: combats*,

retraite et négociations), Smith, “In order to die,” and Palat in *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin* were the principal sources.

¹⁰¹See the French forces available when the General Brière de Lisle assumed the command of the Expeditionary Corps on the 4 September 1884. Captain Lecomte, *Lang-Son: combats, retraite et négociations*, 44.

¹⁰²Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 218.

¹⁰³*Notes sur la campagne du 3eme bataillon de la Légion étrangère au Tonkin*, 15.

¹⁰⁴The gathering of letters by Lamy in *Le commandant Lamy d'après sa correspondance et ses souvenirs de campagne (1858-1900)* perfectly shows the personal engagement of the junior and senior officers in Tonkin during this campaign.

¹⁰⁵Smith, “In order to die,” *Vietnam*, 32 to 35.

¹⁰⁶Lecomte, *Lang-Son: combats, retraite et négociations*, 1895, 207.

¹⁰⁷Smith, “In order to die,” *Vietnam*, 32.

¹⁰⁸Lecomte, *Lang-Son: combats, retraite et négociations*, 473.

CHAPTER 4

A DIFFICULT LEARNING PROCESS GIVING BIRTH TO A PACIFICATION

DOCTRINAL APPROACH (1885-1897)

The administrative organization of a country must perfectly match its nature, that of its people and the purpose of the pacification.

Any administrative organization must follow and support the natural development of the country.¹

— General Joseph Gallieni, *Trois colonnes au Tonkin*

Opening Thoughts

The difficulty of understanding local challenges and the conflicting relations between civilian and military leadership facilitated the development of resistance and piracy among the Annamite population. From 1885 to 1890, the successive *Résidents Généraux* alternated different strategies and constrained the French military forces within a close control. In addition, and despite a continuous adaptation to the environment, the military leaders strongly believed in the control of terrain and mobile columns to defeat the mobile insurgents and pirates. Furthermore, the lack of consistency regarding the role of the traditional hierarchy, arming of villages, and coordination within the security forces undermined the French protectorate and create the conditions for a shadow governance by the insurgency and piracy handling security in the remote areas. The failure became more than obvious at the end of 1890, when piracy and insurgency challenged the French authority just a few miles away from Hanoi. This situation forced the political and military authorities to synchronize their actions and create a new dynamism able to compete with the insecurity, resistance and lack of economic development.

This chapter will discuss the tremendous difficulties which led to the failure and stress on how the changes came out. The analysis will focus on civil and military coordination, adaptation to the local conditions, and military action to conquer, then pacify Tonkin. As a result, the role of the leaders will appear as crucial. The success relied more than in the past on key officers and administrators who married politics, security and economy to elaborate a strong concept of pacification also called as *tache d'huile*, or oil spot strategy.

Narrative

After a difficult fight against the Chinese and Black Flag forces while officers fought a conventional war, the French Expeditionary Corps transitioned to a campaign to control the Tonkin against the current insecurity. Albeit the conquest was guaranteed by several international agreements with China (9 June 1885, second Treaty of Tianjin with China) and on the other hand, with Hué (full application of the Treaty Patenôtre), to gain the struggle for complete control of the Delta and the Upper Tonkin finally lasted ten to twelve years.

Initially, General de Courcy replaced General Brière de L'Isle in June 1885. After an Annamite attack on the French concession in Hué on 5 July 1885, he strongly replied and forced the court to abide by the treaty and accept the French authority. Following this event, General de Courcy developed a military administration over the protectorate but quickly ran out of forces to do so. He proposed to withdraw from the recent conquest and focus on Annam. In December 1885, the French political representatives decided by four votes to maintain the presence and keep on the conquest. Few months later, Mr. Paul Bert was appointed as a *Résident Général* and kicked off the colonial policy in Tonkin.

In October 1887, the political masters reorganized the administration of the Far East territories and created *Indochine*, also called Indochina, made of Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina. The Parisian authority shifted from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Ministry of the Navy and Colonies.

Due to the climate and the cultural difference, Tonkin as the other Vietnamese territories mainly remained an economic colony where few French citizens decided to settle. In 1889, the census conducted estimated that about 1,000 European settlers lived in Tonkin.² Consequently, and contrary to Algeria, Indochina remained under the control of a handful of French colons.

After a quick succession of *résident-généraux*, and unsuccessful policies, the French government decided to appoint Jean Marie Antoine de Lanessan in 1891. On duty until 1894, his action at the head of the local authority facilitated the rise of new doctrines and marked the very beginning of the alliance between political approach and military strategy.

1885-1891: Tensions in the Civil and Military Relationships

Despite a clear decision in 1885 to keep colonizing in Far East, the political framework oscillated for several years. In this context, a number of factors created instability in the civil and military interactions until 1891 when a clear sharing of command coupled with a robust trust facilitated the coordination between both sides.

Far East Colonies and Cost Effective Approach

Many decisions taken in Paris depended on a cost approach to quickly take advantage of events in Tonkin by reducing the costs of military presence and increasing

benefits and taxes. The affairs of Tonkin had been the object of debate from 1872 to 1885 and provoked some virulent political clashes and arguments. After the vote in December 1885, the colonization was clearly accepted and the question was practically closed to discussion.³ Consequently, since the war ended, the French politics really expected a serious pay back based on increasing trade, raising taxes and reducing the costly military deployment. With no clear evidence to support their decision, peace and pacification were simply declared by the French government in 1885.⁴ The first months matched their wishes.⁵

Consequently, the willingness to make Tonkin a beneficial conquest imposed intense constraint on the size of French military contingents in order to decrease the costs. Although the government required the full conquest of Tonkin, it continuously pressured the commanders to reduce the number of troops. Such political inputs created hostilities from the military leaders in charge of seizing and holding remote regions with limited troops. In 1885, General de Courcy proposed to withdraw from Tonkin if more troops (12,000 French and 20,000 Annamite forces) were not sent to control the Upper Tonkin and the frontier with China. Freycinet's government refused the proposal and the Ministry of War released some clear guidance regarding the way ahead and the full conquest of Tonkin with the help of indigenous forces under the French control and command.⁶

Thus, the political pressure from Paris limited the commander's resources and imposed a narrative to support their decisions.

Full Authority for the *Résidents Généraux*

Additionally, once victory was achieved, politicians wanted to reduce the impact of colonies on the governmental stability. To do so, they promoted decentralization of control regarding Tonkin which negatively impacted the overall military capability to achieve the pacification until 1891.

Despite many advantages coming of the full authority given to *Résidents Généraux*, the military leaders suffered from a strong subordination to them which hampered the development of constructive relationships.

In order to simplify the chain of command and decentralize the conduct of local decisions, the French government retained only the control of the appointment process and let the local authorities have a total command upon the military forces and civil servants. As of Paul Bert's nomination, all the *Résidents Généraux* ruled on behalf of French government.⁷ This situation facilitated quick reorganizations not always in favor of the military institution. In 1891, Mr. de Lanessan used his position to empower the officers in the pacification process whereas Paul Bert did the opposite in 1886.⁸ Since the *Résidents Généraux* were linked with political friends or parties, they often changed (thirteen times from 1885 to December 1897), almost as often as the political majority changed inside the Low Chamber.⁹ Such an instability coupled with full powers undoubtedly disrupted the necessary long term policy as well as the quality of relations between the civilian and military authorities.

Lack of Confidence in Army Approach

From 1885 to 1890, the politicians generally disregarded the military forces and were reluctant to give the necessary freedom and means to conduct the pacification.

Although General de Courcy assumed the charge of *Résident Général* for a couple of months, the government decided that the military phase was near an end and that it was high time to put a civilian in charge of affairs. The first decision was to turn the responsibility to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and appoint Paul Bert as *Résident Général* for Annam and Tonkin. Like most of his successors till 1890, he clearly disapproved the military strategy based on the destruction of the enemy, the use of locals for logistics and work force (*corvées*), and the brutality. As a result, he set up a drastic policy to control the military operations, prohibited the contact between the French units and the population, and increased the recruitment of militia under the native and French civil servant control. With the exception of *Résident Général* Richaud (April 1888 to 31 May 1889), the French military forces were required to operate under close civilian control and out of the populated areas.¹⁰

The lack of trust coupled with the reliance on militia units outside the military control, did not provide the suitable structure to ensure unity of effort. Moreover, by taking advantage of their positions, politicians issued some serious decisions which continued to disrupt the delicate stability of Tonkin.

Political Decisions and Instability of Tonkin

From 1885 to 1890, the French *Résidents Généraux* tried to overrule the traditional authority of the king and the mandarin. By attempting to create a new elite and by overthrowing the king, several political decisions upset the population and fuelled the piracy and insurgency by increasing populace grievances.

Initially, General de Courcy launched a military operation to impose a close application of treaties and the control of Annamite throne. As a result, the king fled and

called for a general insurrection against the French presence. Additionally, on 15 August 1885, General de Courcy set up a convention to nominate the principal Annamite leaders and rule the *Comat* (secret cabinet).¹¹ Besides these decisions, he also released the General Order 4, to place the civil administration under the military authority.¹² Like General de Courcy, the successive *Résidents Généraux* several times changed their approach regarding the organization of the political authority. Paul Bert (April-November 1886) like Jean Antoine Constans (November 1887-April 1888) discharged the mandarins and created a school to develop local elite from the peasantry.¹³ On the contrary, Étienne Richaud (April 1888-May 1889) stopped this policy and reinstated the mandarin authority in accordance with the customs and connected them to the village elders. Unfortunately, these last decisions did not last more than one year since Jules Georges Piquet (May 1889-April 1891) cancelled the previous policies.¹⁴

The incessant back and forth resolutions about the administrative organization of Tonkin troubled the local population and increased the village complaints. The attack on the king and the military administration conducted by General de Courcy disturbed the traditional organization of Tonkin. Moreover, most of the decisions taken between 1886 and 1891 disregarded the mandarin system and relied on new local administrators. In so doing, they deeply disrupted a society believing in traditional practices and stability.¹⁵

1891: Civil and Military Collaboration

June 1891 marked the arrival of Jean Marie Antoine de Lanessan, as the new *résidents général*. The date is symbolic for this study even if the decisions to enforce a new policy regarding the civil-military relationship was already prepared by his two predecessors at an experimental level. However, Lanessan generalized a framework

characterized by the return of confidence in the military approach mixed with politics to pacify Tonkin.¹⁶

Richaud and Piquet: Premises and Experimentation

In fact, Étienne Richaud (April 1888-May 1889) and Jules Piquet (May 1889-April 1891) set the conditions for the development of a collaborative approach between the political masters and the military forces. Richaud implemented what military leaders, like General Munier, had been asking for since 1887. Consequently, he established a common plan with General Begin to better share the pacification campaign: “In effect, Richaud proposed converting military commanders into active agents of French imperialism who would seek support from the local population in the process of pacification.”¹⁷

A few months later, *résidents general* Piquet decided to call off the first Richaud’s plan. As a consequence, General Bichot, commander of the French contingent, refused to endorse any responsibility for clashes in Tonkin. The crisis between the civil authorities and military commander reached its pinnacle. Despite Piquet’s opposition, *Résident* Bonnal (*Résident* for Tonkin) succeeded in convincing him to approve experimentation under Lieutenant-Colonel Pennequin’s command. Hence, this first delegation of power over a territory took the total counterpoint to the current policy and marked the premise of the future pacification.¹⁸

1891: Jean de Lanessan and the Pacification

More than all his predecessors, Lanessan received strong support from the officers in charge. This common understanding was exemplary in many respects such as Colonel

Gallieni highlighted in his diary: “Mr. de Lanessan very well understood the reasons which guided me”¹⁹. Others, like the colonels Pennequin, Servière and later Lyautey adhered to the principles handed out by the new chief of the colony.

Lanessan’s first action was to rebuild the trust between the civilian world and the military leaders. Based on the decree issued by the government on 21 April 1891 giving him full authority in Indochina, and the feeling that the insurgency and piracy were closely coordinating their actions, he decided to occupy all the Tonkin and divide the region into four military territories (Sept Pagodes, Lang Son, Cao Bang, and Lao Kay) in which the military leaders received full authority over all forces and the administration. With this important decision, the freedom of action and responsibility of the military leadership grew from a security concern to political affairs, diplomacy, economy, and social development.²⁰

His second action was to reinforce the confidence in the traditional power and set up a collaboration policy aiming at obtaining popular support. In his mind, only the mandarins could rule the country.²¹ Additionally, he developed a policy of race to liberate the minorities (especially in the High Tonkin) from the Annamite authority who were seen as an alien occupation.²² To implement this new policy, he ordered the development of infrastructure such as hospital, dispensaries, roads, and bridges. Such public projects reduced cholera and increased the mobility of troops as well as trade.²³ All these efforts were carried out by the French commanders in their military territories. Consequently, officers enabled the “divide to rule” which triggered a positive relation based on shared interests between the French authorities and the local tribes (*Tho, Mau, Montagnard* tribes...).

Finally, Lanessan changed the strategy to address the insurgency and piracy in the region. After an open and frank discussion with General Resle and Rear-Admiral Fournier, he tasked the military officers to fix the problems of the borders with China to get it involved in the fight against insecurity. Additionally, he ordered the officers to modify their *modus operandi* and avoid any large-scale operation and mobile columns with no clear identified objective.²⁴ This close dialogue simplified the fusion of politics and military effort which would constitute the essence of pacification in Tonkin from 1891 to 1897.

At the political level, the collaboration between politics, civil servants, soldiers, and local authorities and forces drove the progressive pacification process. Insurgent and pirate leaders rallied to the French protectorate under financial pressure and the military operations which disintegrated their movements and forces. Consequently, the area controlled increased and the budget of the colony based on trade and taxes started to be more and more positive.²⁵ In other words, the control of the population as well as the defeat of insurgency became clear by 1895 and 1896.

From 1885 to 1897, several political models ruled Tonkin. Few civil-military collaboration existed till 1891 due to a certain reluctance to let the military leadership lead the pacification of the colony. Moreover, this lack of trust enabled the insurgency and piracy to develop their area of control and influence up to the point that the French did not control very much. On the other side, the French leadership as well as the corps of officers sometimes lacked the aptitude to convince their political masters. They also had to assume a part of the responsibility despite a clear lack of effectiveness for six years (1885-1891) and failure to understand the threat.

Enemy Analysis, a Cruel Misinterpretation

The opposing forces quickly seized the initiative after the French victory over China. To a certain extent, the French officers as well as *Résidents Généraux* did not really understand the threat, why, or how it operated in Tonkin. This error of interpretation had several causes and some of them came from the over simplification bias coupled with the unwillingness to recognize any patriotism in the enemy camp.

For the first years of the conquest, many political decisions and military actions fuelled the opponents. In this frame, the reorganization of administration by Paul Bert (1886) and later Piquet (1889) disrupted the rules of laws and increased the local grievances.²⁶ Furthermore, the replacement of the king by a “puppet” under French control and the discharge of the mandarins turned the traditional power and populace against the French authority which dishonored the local culture and customs.²⁷ Consequently, the former regent Tôn Thát Thuyết and the young king Hàm Nghi called for a general insurrection and gave guidance to facilitate the operations against French interests. In addition to this point, the Annamite laws under which the territory was still ruled did not incorporate piracy as a major crime and the verdict were usually light against the offenders.²⁸

Within this unfavorable environment, the successive military operations, harshness and requirements (forced labor, coolies...) persuaded the local adults to join the insurgents and pirates who offered better pay.²⁹ The lack of tact from the political as well as military sides increased the grievances which fueled the different types of enemies operating in Tonkin. Nevertheless, the most likely answer to the lack of

knowledge came from the quasi absence of intelligence from 1885 to 1891 since the political masters prohibited the French troops from interacting with the populace.³⁰

This disorganization of the intelligence assets coupled with dramatic political and military decisions fed the development of opposition, and confused a complex problem made of two major types of forces.

Two Different Purposes, One Major Modus Operandi

Two tendencies emerged in Tonkin: an insurrection and a more traditional piracy looking for profit. However, for the French officers in charge, analyzing the enemy was really confusing since pirate leaders usually used patriotism as an official narrative to obtain legitimacy in their respective area.³¹ Hence to understand weakness in the initial criticism, it is necessary to give credit to the enemy and broadly describe the resistance, gangsters, smugglers, and piracy.³²

At the end of the conventional operation against China and the Black Flags, the *Can Vuong* (help the king) movement started to operate within the Delta to maintain the traditional system in place and conserve Confucianism against the western forces and influence. Mainly settled in Lower Tonkin (Delta and its foothills), the resistance developed a shadow administration to supplant the official governance collaborating with the French administrators and officers. The organization was focused on the villages where small temporary forces of about two hundred fifty militiamen conducted limited actions against the French troops and citizens in their close environment. The villages benefited from the traditional protection offered by the hedges of bamboos and the walls made of earth. This rudimentary fortification covered the center of villages from the outside and made the control of the “small island” a perilous operation.³³

The piracy covered all Tonkin from the sea coast to the Upper Tonkin. It operated in the Delta, the hills and on the boundaries with China to take advantage of the traffic between the two areas. The different pirate military organized their area using the concealment of lowlands and islands, like the peninsula Than Moi in the Delta,³⁴ as well as the remote areas in the mountains like the region of Ke Thoung in the Upper Tonkin.³⁵ Some Chinese and mixed groups were principally mobile and conducted limited raids in Tonkin to seize buffalos, women, and children.³⁶ Others increased their area of control around their lairs from where they stayed hidden and were protected from any surprise. They usually received support from the population by forcing them to pay tribute and because they offered a shadow structure providing security and some advantages.³⁷

From 1888, the opposing and disparate forces tended to unify their action against the French forces and the European settlers.³⁸ Thus, in 1890-1891, the piracy and insurgency controlled wide areas through a feudal system, levying taxes, providing justice and defending the peasantry against the other predators. Furthermore, their security forces were usually well organized with hierarchy, task organization, battle positions, observation post and assets to collect information on the French and Vietnamese units.³⁹ If the estimation of pirates and insurgents was around 10,000 in 1885, the current figures expressed a serious escalation by 1890.⁴⁰ As a matter of fact, the French considered their enemies as a real challenge since they quickly adapted their courses of action to the French warfare, reducing the effect of the concentration of force and fire provided by the columns.⁴¹ Despite their divisions, the enemy forces offered a real challenge to the French authorities and officers accentuated by a real incomprehension of their motives and key characteristics.

Initial Misinterpretation

According to the French studies, this movement was temporarily misinterpreted and defined as a simple and traditional piracy. In fact, nationalism was mixed up with the piracy and smuggling already presented in Tonkin for centuries.⁴² The lack of contact with the population, the tactical similarities (raid, ambushes, kidnapping) and the mishmash of factors also confused officers and blurred their understanding of the situation.

However, some of them progressively took into consideration the ability and characteristics of their enemy. The description of the enemy published by Colonel Henri Frey in 1888 in *Revue des Deux Mondes*,⁴³ clearly depicted and arrayed the piracy and insurgency in Tonkin. Moreover, he acknowledged the patriotism in the movement. At the same time Colonel Servière and Lieutenant-colonel Pennequin also recognized the nationalism of insurgency and the *Cuan Vuong* in Annam.⁴⁴ Contrary to these precursors, Colonel Gallieni and Major Lyautey refused to give credit to this analysis and described the enemy as a group of pirates, smuggler and gangsters only interested in profit and using patriotism as a tool to legitimize their actions.⁴⁵ This sticking point can be explained by two reasons. Firstly, the unwillingness to recognize Annam and Tonkin as a nation stressed the necessity to maintain a strong protectorate over a territory without any identity, and, in doing so, legitimize the French colonization. On the other side, a recent analysis issued by Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery explained that the real insurgency stopped around 1891 because of internal difficulties, lack of support, and severe drought.⁴⁶

Whatever the reason was, the officers really committed to their initial misinterpretation in 1889-1890. Helped by the authorization to directly collect information from the population, the understanding of the enemy became better and successively drove the operations against the enemy strongpoint like in Thai Ngan in 4 December 1893. Despite a debate regarding the insurgency and piracy, the main reason of the collapse was the political interdiction to interact with the locals (1886-1891) which greatly explained the lack of real military intelligence. Consequently, this debate impeded the pacification for six years and was progressively solved by the use of agents, informers, and military units led by professional intelligence officers, like Lieutenant Boucabeille working for Colonel Gallieni in the 4th Military Territory in 1893-1894.⁴⁷

In parallel to the political change led by Jean de Lanessan, the military institution started understanding its enemy with more accuracy. However, it was not the only adaptation to the circumstances and constraints during the campaign.

Military Adaptations of the Forces

Notwithstanding great adaptations to fit the French forces to the geographic, climatic, and tactical particularisms during the conflict with China, the military leaders continued to face several challenges which required substantial reforms to meet the new operational environment. From this initial period (1883-1885), the military tools were modified regarding sustainment, equipment, transportation, and the tactics to fight in jungle, mountains, and rolling terrain. The pacification forced the leaders to keep on changing their certitudes.

Manpower and Indigenous Forces

A few weeks after the peace agreement with China, the French Expeditionary Forces counted two divisions (almost 35,000 soldiers, on 1 June 1885), plus one division in reserve in France. Thanks to the Chinese withdrawal, the military authorities shifted the main mission to the control of piracy in the Delta. At the same time, the government required a reduction of the amount of forces, expecting a more secure environment.⁴⁸ Yet, in addition to the political willingness to progressively reduce the forces, military decisions, dispersal of troops, as well as health constraints quickly increased tensions and limited the ability of the French units. All these elements triggered the Vietnamese recruitment of troops.

When General de Courcy waged the operation against Hué in July 1885, he seriously limited the freedom of action in Tonkin by taking 6,000 soldiers to secure the capital and face the first spots of insurgency. Therefore, he decided to posture his few available troops in the Delta and mainly in the major positions. The second factor was a huge epidemic of cholera which infected up to 10,000 soldiers, killed 2,380 and required repatriation 3,200 according to the official reports. These affected the availability of forces by 45 percent in Tonkin until the beginning of 1886. Cholera remained a serious concern with some episodic peaks of epidemic.⁴⁹

The political willingness to reduce the contingent, the decision to more involve the locals, and decrease the exposure French troops judged too weak to bear the climate, triggered the process to rely more and more on native forces. The purpose was to let them handle the pacification in Tonkin and assign the French troops to major operations and border security. In fact, the French contingent decreased from 35,000 in 1885 to 9,400 in

1895. In parallel, indigenous units were raised from 20 percent to 61 percent in 1895 (cf. table 6). The indigenous forces were composed of *Tirailleurs Tonkinois* who worked under the French command, the militia units under the French civilian control, and about 3,000 *Linh Cos* under mandarin command and used as a police force.⁵⁰ According to current studies, the self-defense units recruited from the rural area and under the command of village leaders did not enter into this accountability.

Table 6. Ratio French Troop versus Indigenous Forces (1885-1895)

	French Troops		Indigenous Forces		total
	total	%	total	%	
1885	28,000	80%	7,000	20%	35,000
1888	13,300	49%	13,700	51%	27,000
1895	9,400	39%	14,600	61%	24,000

Source: Created by author, data from J. Kim Munholland, “Collaboration Strategy and the French Pacification of Tonkin, 1885-1897,” *The Historical Journal* 24, no. 3 (September 1981): 645-646.

The outcomes of Vietnamization were the quick integration of local *tirailleurs* to mitigate the lack of European forces and increase the strength of columns (cf. table 7). The ratio usually admitted to maximize the French and Tonkinese troops was one French soldier for two locals, as long as the *Tirailleurs* were led by French officers and non-commissioned officers. Some temporary mixed units were also developed throughout period. The infantry company, also called group, was the lowest level of integration. Under the command of French captain, it included two platoons: the indigenous platoon led by a European officer consisting of 100 rifles and two sections, and the French

platoon made of 50 rifles.⁵¹ According to several reports, these local units were particularly appreciated by the military leaders for their quality during the operation.⁵² Moreover, the decision by *Résident Général* Piquet to dissolve them in July 1890 upset the officers who strongly argued against such a dangerous reduction of their capacity.⁵³

Table 7. Ratio of Tonkinese Forces in the Operations (1885-1889)

Battles/ Campaigns	Date	French	Tonkinese	Total Forces	% of indigenous forces
Than Mai	October 1885	3120	983	4103	24%
Ba Dinh	December 1886-February 1887	1579	1951	3530	55%
Macao	February 1887	613	885	1498	59%
Bo Gia	October 1887	157	280	437	64%
Thoung Lam	September 1889	78	114	192	59%

Source: Created by author, data from Chef de Bataillon Chabrol, *Operations Militaires au Tonkin* (Paris: Henri Charles Lavauzelle, 1896), 68-101.

The pacification obviously depended on the ability of the French contingent to conduct their mission but also on the commander's ability to employ and synchronize native units out of their direct control. Until Lanessan's decision, the unity of command and effort were clearly at risk and represented a key challenge.

Major Tactical Adaptations

To match the operational environment, military leaders did not hesitate to modify the doctrinal principles regarding the column warfare and the junior officer role in combat operations.

The first adaptation focused on the column warfare. For a long time, the tactics used against the piracy looked like the operations against the Chinese and Black Flags forces conducted between 1883 and 1885. In October 1885, General de Courcy launched a major operation to pacify the Delta with large columns of 5,600 soldiers in Than-Mai and others units under the command of General de Négrier to disrupt the piracy in the canal of Bamboos.⁵⁴ The number of troops tended to decrease due to the redeployment of French units. However, the column remained a tactical approach to attack the pirate and insurgent sanctuary and pursue the mobile enemies until 1888-1889. In this frame, the basic tactical unit selected by the commander shifted from the battalion to the company. In January and February 1889, the operations in Chomoi and Chochu required only six companies of about 700 soldiers.⁵⁵ Several reasons explained the current adaptation. First, the logistics constraints: each column included a train and a convoy of coolies to sustain the force. Whatever the size of the column, the average was around one coolie per soldier when the task force was light and two coolies per soldier if the column included some artillery support.⁵⁶ Therefore the size of the column clearly limited its mobility against a light and mobile enemy. The second reason was the lack of troops to cover the Tonkin due to the reduction of forces and the willingness to set up several outposts to control the remote areas.

The second adaptation relied on the seizure of key terrain features by small tactical units, usually half-companies. Feeling a lack of control, General de Courcy's chief of staff ordered forces to scatter into small posts over Tonkin in November 1885. He added some recommendations based on their strategic position, protection, and proximity with the rivers and roads to facilitate the sustainment by boat and main

convoys. The purpose was to task the Tonkinese units in the Delta and array the 80 French posts defended by ten battalions around them in depth.⁵⁷ This initial guidance emphasized the confidence in junior officers and remained the usual framework of the contingent but clearly limited the possibility to concentrate forces and enabled the enemy to progressively challenge the small forces dispersed far from each other.

Ultimately, this period was rich in adaptation to the local conditions for the military forces. The column warfare remained the basic principle to conduct an offensive operation in Tonkin. Its size and composition changed to match the enemy mobility and tactics. In addition, this period marked a relative confidence in the local troops to complement the French contingent. Finally, throughout the period, the junior officers received more and more responsibility to handle the military posts scattered over Tonkin and the command of columns and groups during the main operations.

Adaptation of Logistics to the Pacification of Tonkin

The action against China relied on permanent flow from the logistical bases in Tonkin towards the front and advanced positions. Since the conflict was relatively linear, the centralization remained the best way to sustain the expeditionary corps; moreover, the logistics chain was out of the commander' hands and depended on the Ministry of the Navy and Colony since 1887.⁵⁸ The pacification through several small combat outposts scattered over the territory put at risk the logistics and forced them to adapt their system under enemy pressure and the heavy demands from the units in the field.

The terrain and the latent hostility of the population to provide coolies and resources disrupted the flows towards the remote areas. Consequently, when Gallieni took command of his military territory in 1893, he noted that it was unusual to have fresh

foods and regular resupplies in most posts. Judging that the situation was unacceptable, he wrote to the general in chief and the main administrator (10 December 1893) to require a decentralization of sustainment. Lanessan supported this request and decided to reorganize the military administration under a single command and issued financial resources to the army. Therefore each post received a budget to manage its own stocks, consumption, and resupply by paying local coolies to carry the foods and goods from the main storage to the post.⁵⁹

Required by the military leaders, the reform of logistics and *Intendance* lasted a long time and highlights the difficulties encountered by the remote and isolated posts. The decentralization of logistics accompanied the decentralization of the operation and was part of the effort to unify the means under the local responsibility and command.

With no indulgence, numerous historians usually considered as a great military failure the period which ran from 1885 to 1890 since the situation required urgent reforms in 1891. Therefore, even if the events in High Tonkin in 1891 forced the political masters and military leaders to severely modify their action and start coordinating their strategies, the pacification can be described as halting, requiring adaptation regarding the use of massive columns versus the string of small outposts, the relations with the population, the integration of local forces within the French military pacification, and the control of the Upper Tonkin. Consequently and contrary to some studies like those issued by Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery (*Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954*), the military commanders continued to adapt the tool to the rebellion.

Strategic Adaptation, towards a Coherent Approach

Military Approach to Conquer, not to Pacify

From 1885 to 1890, two strategies drove pacification: a civil approach and military operations to secure Tonkin. The unbalanced method and reliance on the civil approach was not the only reason of the initial failure to pacify the Tonkin. Numerous officers still believed that their role was to only destroy the enemy composed of pirates and insurgents.⁶⁰

Although the military was not really involved in the pacification process, some attempts were carried out to adapt the military scheme of maneuver to the situation. The military approach to pacify the Tonkin drove the numerous campaigns in the Delta and along the mountainous areas from the coast to the north. In the Delta, the columns were the rule from June 1885 to February 1887. They temporary reduced the rebellion but did not prevent the escalation of force in 1888. The situation was clearly explosive when *Doi Van* (chief rebel) took the control of *Canal des Rapides* and when politicians decided to transfer the security of Tonkin to the militia. In the mountainous area, the conquest started also in 1885 but was more progressive due to the terrain and the enemy activity. In both cases, small posts at strategic terrain points and major operations should defeat the enemy forces. Unfortunately, they did not achieve the expected pacification.⁶¹ On the contrary, these efforts were incomplete and the military option focused on “attacking the armed gang where it is then destroying it”⁶² failed every time. These military difficulties coupled with the weaknesses of the local police and militia to handle the security in their areas facilitated the development of insurrection and piracy.⁶³

Such tactical efforts by the military leadership did not focus the troops on controlling population and addressed no more the roots of insurgency or challenge enough the particularisms of piracy.

Colonels Frey, Servière, and Lieutenant-Colonel Pennequin

Although different military leaders tried to adapt their units to the environment, the conditions in the field did not really change. The pacification of Tonkin, specially the Upper Region and the vicinity of the Delta, remained unachieved in 1889. In this atmosphere, several officers proposed to synchronize the political plan by involving the military forces. In a certain way, they were the Gallieni's precursors by clearly expressing their solutions, and trying to match the social and political specificities of Tonkin.

In November 1891, Colonel Frey published an article "La Piraterie au Tonkin" in *Revue des Deux-Mondes* discussing the piracy in Tonkin and suggesting the approach he tried to practice to defeat the piracy and insurgency during his tour. He proposed three major reforms: clearing the Chinese sanctuaries by pressuring the Chinese authorities, integrating the Vietnamese forces by fusing the militia into the *Tirailleurs Tonkinois*, creating a local military police forces (*Gendarmerie Tonkinoise*), and finally by adapting the contingent to the colonial specifics. This last proposal merits a better description. The purpose was to set up a colonial army and encouraged the leadership to fully consider the particular environment. In his mind, new equipment was required like body armor, new muskets adapted to the jungle, war-dogs, optical telegraphs, and additional mortars. Regarding the leadership, he called for a three year combat tour and a better collection as well as recording of intelligence in each post. All these proposals came from his

experience and represented the first broad public proposal to improve the pacification strategy in the Far East colony.⁶⁴

However, this article brought out some points that were currently developed by Colonel Servière and Lieutenant-Colonel Pennequin in Tonkin. The core tenets were the complete military authority over the territory, the forces, and civil administration. This approach allowed the pacification of Son La in April 1889 and Tanh Hao Dao in 27 December 1889.⁶⁵ Unfortunately, the political pressure stopped this expansion of this experimentation until 1891 but set the conditions for the following major evolutions in the colonial warfare.

Lanessan: Trigger the Pacification

The trigger point in the pacification process was the appointment of Jean de Lanessan as Résidents Général in June 1891. His adoption of Pennequin and Servière's strategy initiated a military and political collaboration to pacify Tonkin.⁶⁶ The situation, according to his memories, was close to a major rebellion and most of the Upper Tonkin was out of French control. Even if this description matched his willingness to highlight his performance as a political governor, the reality was the result of policies implemented by his predecessors which did not achieve their goals.⁶⁷

Facing a difficult situation, he decided to reorganize the security and military forces, as well as their responsibilities. In the south of the Delta, he let the militia under the command of French officers secure the countryside and empowered the *Linh Cos* in villages under the native responsibility.⁶⁸ Furthermore, he subdivided the rest of Tonkin into four military territories and declared the “state of war” to put senior officers in charge of leading all the forces and managing the administration.⁶⁹ This decision directly

solved the conflict between the civil residents and military authorities, and provided the funds and resources to improve the 150 posts scattered in the Upper Region and along the borders.

In this framework, the example of the 2nd Military Territory highlights the new geographic organization of Tonkin. Based on the human terrain, the politics and military leaders decided to map out the military areas of operation in accordance with the administrative and traditional boundaries. Hence, the main headquarter was placed at Lang Son and directed by a colonel. This territory was also divided into three military circles (Lang Son, Cao Bang and Ha Giang), each one under the command of a major. The circle was made of sectors commanded by a captain with one company and several local units to handle the different sub-sectors and blockhouses.⁷⁰ As a result, each military authority corresponded with one main native leader. Consequently, the sector based only on terrain disappeared and instead was replaced with an organization matching the human terrain.

Even if Lieutenant-Colonel Pennequin and Colonel Servière had developed a new approach, the real facilitator was the trust between Jean de Lannessan and his military subordinates. On the other side, these officers also adhered to the supremacy of politics and administration (primary dynamic) to pacify supported by the military action (secondary dynamic).⁷¹ Moreover, the clear understanding of the situation by the R.G. de Lannessan facilitated the implementation of military action, the allocation of resources, the renewal of diplomatic relation with China, the development of adaptive policies regarding native authorities and people, and finally, an adequate economic program to facilitate trade and expansion.⁷²

Lanessan's successor continued his policy and continuously trusted the military leadership. This situation depicted a coherent civil military approach based on mutual respect regarding the political guidance on one side and on the other hand, a strong financial and political support of the military action in the four military territories. The alliance of interests and sharing of responsibilities characterized the framework required for the pacification of Tonkin.

Gallieni: Implementation of Coherent Approach

Although Colonel Gallieni was only in charge of the 1st and 2nd Military Territory from the end of 1893 until 1896, the abundant literature⁷³ enables the study in depth of this method and success.

Oil Spot Strategy: Three Core Tenets

According to Gallieni, only “the combined action of politics and use of force achieves the pacification.”⁷⁴ Indeed, the primary action is politics that military forces supported. Both enabled the economic development of the local society. This method relied on a bottom-up approach in which the local solution prevailed over national answer. “The common sense and initiative of the local commanding officers through their direct relationship with local people reveal the difficulties and concerns to the high administration.”⁷⁵

Political Action

To a certain extent, Gallieni implemented the policy of race in his area of responsibility. The desired effect was to control the population. In this frame, the necessary skill was to know the human terrain in which the forces operated. This

extended knowledge relied on interactions with the leaders and natives by using their language and respecting their customs. The initial task was to draw a map representing all the ethnicities in the area of operation, identify the lines of fracture, the rivalries, the grievances, and finally identify how “exploit some of useful native elements, neutralize and destroy those we cannot take advantage.”⁷⁶ This policy to divide in order to rule relied on the indigenous leaders and how the military leaders could use some of them in their best interests, and disregard the others. This collaboration strategy directly served the pacification by increasing the local support and using the local tensions against hostile groups and peoples.⁷⁷

Action by Force

The military action represented the complement of civil affairs and policy in the oil spot strategy. The military action relied on a variety of slow and rapid approaches from the villages to the district. The slow tactic aimed at progressively conquering the country through a net of military posts controlling the population center and axis of mobility, and protecting the rear to enable the economic development and administrative reorganization. The arming of villages added to the effort by filling the gap between French positions. In addition to this, the military leader kept some units to conduct quick offensives against key objectives and selected lairs, and insurgent hot spots. This second aspect conserved the military approach to defeat the enemy after isolating them from the populace.⁷⁸ Based on a slow approach, completed by some exceptional offensive operations, the action by force made the French operations credible through protection of population against piracy and insurgent influence, as well as destroying the enemy capabilities.⁷⁹

Economic Action and Organization

Provided the political and military actions were achieved, the local military leaders could start developing the local economy to increase the motives of satisfaction for the populace. At the same time, they did not forget that the secondary goals of the economic development aimed at increasing the freedom of action and mobility for troops, and obtaining adhesion, support, and intelligence from the locals. The main effort depended on the ability to build adequate roads and in some areas, railways. In Gallieni's mind, the construction should be durable to express the French power and commitment. More than a direct injection of funds, the economic development relied on the mobility and circulation of goods and foods, and indirectly the increase of wealth for the populace and taxes for the French colony in a long term perspective.⁸⁰

Type of Officers Required for the Colonial Services

Such a new job needed specific skills and a real extension of expertise. Regarding the officers, a new model showed up based on a balance between military and administrative competencies. To achieve that, Gallieni ordered his officers to perfectly know and understand their area by learning the language and depicting the human behavior and culture.⁸¹ Even the soldiers were touched by this new approach. The pacification required them to handle police tasks in lieu of the local forces and developed their civil skills as craftsmanship, teaching, supervising construction, and so on.⁸² All these elements together shaped the colonial warrior that pacification needed.

The fusion of competencies not only relied on the decision to implement a new policy but also on the individual and collective qualities of the French contingent.

Application to the 2nd Military Territory

From 1 December 1893 to February 1896, Gallieni conducted pacification in the 2nd Military Territory according to three main modus operandi: the control of the Chinese border, the persuasion of people, and coercive measures.

The closure of the border with China imposed a long diplomatic and military action to solve the disputes and involve this neighbor in the struggle against piracy, smuggling, and insurgent movements.⁸³ In parallel, the French units established forts to monitor the border and the infiltration tracks. Additionally, Gallieni was involved in the commission to establish common boundary markers with the support of the French topographic team (Lieutenants Detrie, Querette and Dumat). Finally, in order to obtain a complete compliance by China, he ordered some native troops under Lieutenant Boucabeille's command to carry out raids and *razzias* against Chinese villages which supported piracy. All these actions made of persuasion and coercion facilitated the development of positive relations between Gallieni and Marshall Sou Com Pao in March 1894. Thanks to this personal relationship and the physical controls of the infiltration tracks, the cross-border operations decreased and isolated the piracy from its sanctuaries in China.⁸⁴

The acceptance by people of the French policy was successively obtained by protecting the people with military forces, arming the villagers (Gallieni issued more than 20,000 rifles), and putting local tribes in charge.⁸⁵ The armament of villagers was a risky action but fit the local tradition (each village was responsible for protecting itself). The immediate effect was the difficulties for the piracy to easily attack the village and capture buffalos, women, and children.⁸⁶ In order to govern through native leaders, Gallieni

expelled the mandarins who used to rule the minorities (Tho, Mau). Consequently, he obtained a strong compliance by these ethnics.⁸⁷ Additionally, the persuasion increased with the extension and improvement of the road network. Due to this progress, the trade provided better living conditions in the villages and strengthened the trust between the French and the populace. Increasingly, the natives started transmitting information to the posts and helped major operations.⁸⁸ To a certain extent, “hearts and minds” was a success but was also the key enabler to act and operate against the opponent forces. More than a people centric approach, it was the precondition to control the terrain against the opposing forces.

Although the success of the pacification process depended on the agreement of people to the French project, the real enabler was the use of force provided by the military forces. Facing a real disorganization and an obvious lack of efficiency, Gallieni quickly rationalized the net of military posts in the 2nd Military Territory. The purpose was to improve the capability to control the population, monitor enemy movements, and promptly act against any enemy gathering. The rationalization started with the settlement of forts to control each key village. A half day of travel separated each sector, and four kilometers separated the blockhouse from their main post. This short distance allowed a quick reinforcement and in case of major attack, a quick support from another sector within a couple of hours. The alarm was transmitted by optical telegraph established between each fort and position. To reinforce the limited French troops, Gallieni used the local forces and *Tirailleurs Tonkinois*. He also developed local counter-insurgency troops employing the same course of action as the enemy forces.⁸⁹ Finally, since the terrain was strongly screened, Gallieni set up several major operations driven by intelligence against

the enemy gatherings and lairs. In this case, the French troops carried the main effort supported by local troops to flank, conduct ambushes, and screen the areas around the objective. This was the case in December 1893-January 1894 in Lung Lat, and later, against the pirate leaders Ba Ky (April-May 1895) and De Tham (October-December 1895).⁹⁰

In fact, the combination of alliance with China, persuasion, acceptance, and pressure achieved the purpose of pacification from the bottom to the top. The progressive control of Upper Tonkin from 1891 to 1895-1897, stressed the importance of patience in oil spot strategy. The other aspect was the clear understanding of the local and regional logical interests which fortunately served the French interests. The absence of strong national mindset in the Upper Tonkin simplified the implementation of policy of race and the “divide to rule”. This initial success set the pace for a doctrinal development within the army.

Trigger a Debate about Pacification Methodology

As of 1888, the pacification of Tonkin became a topic for the military professional studies. The personal experience turned to a more serious analysis which built the baseline of a colonial doctrine of pacification.

Among the main professional reviews published at that time, the *Revue Militaire de l'Etranger*, the *Journal des Sciences Militaires* and the branch publications participated in the officer formation.⁹¹ In 1888, “Souvenirs de Campagne” in *Journal des Sciences Militaires*, written by an anonymous author, described the conquest of Tonkin from Navy Lieutenant Garnier to the operations against China (1883-1885). This is the first real report of the Far East conquest. However, the first serious military studies and

insight really started in 1889 for the branches (“Service du Genie au Tonkin” [Engineer in Tonkin] in *Revue du Genie* in 1889, “Infanterie Montée”[Mounted Infantry] in *Revue d’Infanterie* in 1893). In 1891 a debate regarding the formation and creation of a colonial army appeared (“Projet d’organisation d’une armée colonial” [Colonial Army Project] in *Journal des Sciences Militaires* in 1891). These discussions were mainly based on personal insights and proposals: it was still a more of means of communication to educate than an institutional publication.

Although these articles covered some relevant aspects of the war, one book really proposed a doctrinal approach of the pacification: *Operations Militaires au Tonkin* by Major Chabrol (1896). For the first time, the author described the key operations and battles, and then proposed a doctrinal framework to conduct pacification with military forces. The second part of this manuscript defined how to employ units against insurgency and piracy, organize the columns, the security operations and intelligence, and the logistics operations. This attempt marked the willingness to seriously study the phenomenon and go beyond the personal memories and experience.

A few years later, numerous publications tried to highlight the common lessons and approaches to pacify a colony and protectorate like *Trois colonnes au Tonkin* by General Gallieni (1899) in which the author enounced his principles of pacification in the conclusions chapter. The end of this long process were the lectures conducted at the War College in Paris by Lieutenant-Colonel Ditte about the war in colony in 1903-1904.⁹²

Finally, despite a long learning process, the publications remained relatively disparate. According to the doctrinal publications and reviews from 1885 to 1899, the main area of interest stayed the German empire and the European armies.⁹³

Consequently, the knowledge and experience were initially developed in the different colonies through a group of officers tied together by their common experience under the command of famous leaders.

Sub-Conclusion

The victory over China opened the way to the conquest of Tonkin. Nevertheless errors of appreciation and desynchronization between the political masters and military leaders disrupted the necessary coordination and trust between the two facets of pacification. Despite numerous tactical adaptations and operations against the opponent forces, the political approach and the military campaign failed to defeat the piracy and insurgency. Lanessan's appointment in 1891 and his initial decisions shaped a favorable environment to develop pacification. Progressively, the pieces were gathered in one coherent approach.

The second insight was the relative importance of junior officers resulting from the decentralization of command and the deployment of company and platoon posts in Tonkin. This confidence in the lower echelon structured the development of pacification. Even if the senior officers facilitated the rise of new approaches (Colonels Servière and Gallieni, Lieutenant-Colonel Pelissier), and continued to lead the major operations and columns, the junior officers carried out pacification in their respective areas of responsibility, handling the relations with locals, the security with the native forces and collecting information. They statistically suffered more casualties through the operations than the senior officers (see table 8). Therefore, the infantry junior officers from *Troupes de Marine, Légion Étrangère*, and Tonkinese Skirmishers were the backbone of pacification based on the bottom-up approach and the keystone of column operations.

Table 8. Officer Casualties in Tonkin Major Operations (1885-1895)

	Infantry			Artillery		Engineer		Administration
	Major	Captain	Lieutenant	Captain	Lieutenant	Captain	Lieutenant	Officer
1885		1	4	1				1
1886		1	8			1		
1887		1	3					
1888		2	4					
1889			5	1				
1890		1	9					
1891		3	5					
1892	1	5	10	1	1			
1893		1	1					
1894								
1895		1	1					
Sub-Total	1	16	50	3	1	1	0	1
Total		67		4		1		1

Source: Created by author, data from Chef de Bataillon Chabrol, *Operations Militaires au Tonkin* (Paris: Henri Charles Lavauzelle, 1896), 316.

Finally, the main operations ended in 1897 when piracy and insurgency could be considered as defeated and the main enemy leaders killed (Hong Tai Ngan), expelled to China (Dieu Van Tri) or rallied to the French governance (Pham Dinh Phung and Luong Tam Ky). Some sporadic rebellions came out later but not with the same tensions until 1946. The reasons of victory were multiple and resulted from a perception of common interests between local peoples and the French protectorate, the exhaustion and lack of dynamism of insurgency, and the defeat of the major piracy groups.⁹⁴

¹Premier principe: l'organisation administrative d'un pays doit être parfaitement en rapport avec la nature de ce pays, de ses habitants et du but que l'on se propose. Deuxième principe: toute organisation administrative doit suivre le pays dans son développement naturel. Translated by the author. General Joseph Gallieni, *Trois colonnes au Tonkin* (Paris: Librairie Militaire R. Chapelot et Cie, 1899), 154.

²Vial, *Nos premières années au Tonkin*, 469.

³Carl Cavanagh Hodge , *Encyclopedia of the Age of Imperialism, 1800–1914* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), 1, 247.

⁴Edmond Bevin, *Au Tonkin, Milices et Piraterie* (Paris: Henri Charles Lavauzelle, 1891), 5.

⁵Vial, *Nos premières années au Tonkin*, 446.

⁶Munholland, “Collaboration Strategy' and the French Pacification of Tonkin, 1885-1897,” 631-632.

⁷Vial, *Nos premières années au Tonkin*, 223.

⁸Jean Marie Antoine Lanessan, *La Colonisation Française de L’Indochine* (Paris: Felix Alcan, 1895), Foreword vii.

⁹Gambetta was a close friend of Paul Bert as Jean-Marie de Lanessan was known as a member of the Radical party. See Knight M. M., “French Colonial Policy-the Decline of ‘Association’,” *The Journal of Modern History* 5, no. 2 (June 1933): 209.

¹⁰Munholland, “Collaboration Strategy and the French Pacification of Tonkin, 1885-1897,” 633-634 and 639.

¹¹Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 496.

¹²Released on 7 June 1885, the general order number 4 described the authority of the military officers over the local and civil servants. See Vial, *Nos premières années au Tonkin*, 227.

¹³Stephen, *History of French Colonial Policy (1870-1925)*, 442; Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954*, 61.

¹⁴Munholland, “Collaboration Strategy' and the French Pacification of Tonkin, 1885-1897,” 638-639.

¹⁵Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954*, 75; Munholland, “Collaboration Strategy and the French Pacification of Tonkin, 1885-1897,” 639.

¹⁶Christopher Griffin, “A Revolution in Colonial Military Affairs and the *Tache d’Huile*” (Lecture of Conference, Leicester, Great Britain, 14-16 December 2009), 20.

¹⁷Munholland, “Collaboration Strategy' and the French Pacification of Tonkin, 1885-1897,” 639.

¹⁸Ibid., 643.

¹⁹Joseph-Simon Gallieni, *Gallieni au Tonkin* (Paris: Berger Levraut, 1941).

²⁰Lanessan, *La Colonisation Française de L'Indochine*, foreword vi and 2.

²¹Stephen, *History of French Colonial Policy (1870-1925)*, 449.

²²Chesneaux, “Stages in the Development of the Vietnam National Movement 1862-1940,” 63 and Lanessan, *La Colonisation Française de L'Indochine*, 56-61.

²³Munholland, “Collaboration Strategy’ and the French Pacification of Tonkin, 1885-1897,” 646.

²⁴Lanessan, *La Colonisation Française de L'Indochine*, 65-66.

²⁵Chesneaux, “Stages in the Development of the Vietnam National Movement 1862-1940,” 64; Lanessan, *La Colonisation Française de L'Indochine*, 124; Munholland, “Collaboration Strategy’ and the French Pacification of Tonkin, 1885-1897,” 646.

²⁶Stephen, *History of French Colonial Policy (1870-1925)*, 440; Munholland, “Collaboration Strategy and the French Pacification of Tonkin, 1885-1897,” 639.

²⁷Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954*, 53.

²⁸Colonel Henri Frey, “La Piraterie au Tonkin,” *Revue des Deux-Mondes* (November-December 1891) : 436.

²⁹Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 504.

³⁰Munholland, “Collaboration Strategy and the French Pacification of Tonkin, 1885-1897,” 634.

³¹Frey, “La Piraterie au Tonkin,” 452.

³²The reader can find a clear study of the piracy in Tonkin in “La Piraterie au Tonkin” written by Frey (*Revue des Deux-Mondes*, nov-dec 1891) and in *Au Tonkin, Milices et Piraterie* written by Edmond Bevin (Paris: Henri Charles Lavauzelle, 1891).

³³Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954*, 53.

³⁴Vial, *Nos premières années au Tonkin*, 232 and 272.

³⁵Frey, “La Piraterie au Tonkin,” 444.

³⁶Gallieni, *Gallieni au Tonkin*, 129.

³⁷Frey, “La Piraterie au Tonkin,” 444.

³⁸Munholland, “Collaboration Strategy and the French Pacification of Tonkin, 1885-1897,” 636.

³⁹Frey, “La Piraterie au Tonkin,” 442.

⁴⁰Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 477.

⁴¹Frey, “La Piraterie au Tonkin,” 461.

⁴²Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954*, 51

⁴³*Revue des Deux Mondes* is a monthly civilian magazine addressing some serious topics and debate, as literature, culture, world and public and politics. It started in 1829 and continues to be published mainly in France.

⁴⁴Marc Michel, *Gallieni* (Paris: Fayard, 1989), 145.

⁴⁵Gallieni, *Gallieni au Tonkin*, Foreword.

⁴⁶Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954*, 58.

⁴⁷Gallieni, *Gallieni au Tonkin*, 147.

⁴⁸Vial, *Nos premières années au Tonkin*, 224-227.

⁴⁹Palat, *Les Expéditions Françaises au Tonkin*, 477-478, and 516.

⁵⁰Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954*, 58; Gallieni, *Gallieni au Tonkin*, 8; Lanessan, *La Colonisation Française de L’Indochine*, 35.

⁵¹Chef de Bataillon Chabrol, *Operations Militaires au Tonkin* (Paris: Henri Charles Lavauzelle, Paris, 1896), 322.

⁵²Chabrol, *Operations Militaires au Tonkin*, 259 and 263.

⁵³Munholland, “Collaboration Strategy and the French Pacification of Tonkin, 1885-1897,” 639.

⁵⁴Vial, *Nos premières années au Tonkin*, 243-244.

⁵⁵Chabrol, *Operations Militaires au Tonkin*, 264 and 92.

⁵⁶Ibid., 324.

⁵⁷Vial, *Nos premières années au Tonkin*, 278-280.

⁵⁸A. Baratier, *L'Administration Militaire au Tonkin* (Paris: Victor Rozier, 1889), 1 and 2.

⁵⁹Gallieni, *Gallieni au Tonkin*, 12 and 13, 227.

⁶⁰Munholland, “Collaboration Strategy and the French Pacification of Tonkin, 1885-1897,” 639.

⁶¹Chabrol, *Operations Militaires au Tonkin*, 27-30 and 35-40.

⁶²Ibid., 246.

⁶³Lanessan, *La Colonisation Française de L'Indochine*, 46.

⁶⁴Frey, “La Piraterie au Tonkin,” 461-463.

⁶⁵Chabrol, *Operations Militaires au Tonkin*, 50 and 51.

⁶⁶Michel, *Gallieni*, 147.

⁶⁷Lanessan, *La Colonisation Française de L'Indochine*, 2-5.

⁶⁸Ibid., 52.

⁶⁹Chesneaux, “Stages in the Development of the Vietnam National Movement 1862-1940,” 66.

⁷⁰Gallieni, *Gallieni au Tonkin*, 3, 57 and 215

⁷¹Chabrol, *Operations Militaires au Tonkin*, 254.

⁷²Lanessan, *La Colonisation Française de L'Indochine*, 56-58.

⁷³Gallieni described his action in his memories and letters that have been analyzing many times since the 19th century.

⁷⁴Gallieni, *Gallieni au Tonkin*, 210.

⁷⁵Ibid., 210.

⁷⁶“En somme toute l’action politique doit consister à discerner et mettre à profit les éléments locaux utilisables, à neutraliser et à détruire ceux qui ne le sont pas.” Gallieni, *Gallieni au Tonkin*, 211.

⁷⁷Christopher Griffin, “A Revolution in Colonial Military Affairs and the *Tache d’Huile*” (Lecture of Conference, Leicester, Great Britain, 14-16 December 2009), 23.

⁷⁸Gallieni, *Gallieni au Tonkin*, 211.

⁷⁹Etienne de Durand, “Francs-Tireurs et Centurions, les ambiguïtés de l’héritage contre-insurrectionnel français,” *Focus Stratégique* 29 (March 2011): 11.

⁸⁰Griffin, “A Revolution in Colonial Military Affairs and the *Tache d’Huile*,” 24; Gallieni, *Gallieni au Tonkin*, 7, 51, and 213.

⁸¹Michel, *Gallieni*, 159.

⁸² Gallieni, *Gallieni au Tonkin*, 216.

⁸³Porch, “Bugeaud, Gallieni, Lyautey: The Development of French Colonial Warfare,” 389.

⁸⁴Gallieni, *Gallieni au Tonkin*, 21, 123 and 132; Munholland, “Collaboration Strategy and the French Pacification of Tonkin, 1885-1897,” 647.

⁸⁵Munholland, “Collaboration Strategy and the French Pacification of Tonkin, 1885-1897,” 644.

⁸⁶Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954*, 63.

⁸⁷Gallieni, *Gallieni au Tonkin*, Berger Levraud, Paris, 1941, 53.

⁸⁸Porch, “Bugeaud, Gallieni, Lyautey: The Development of French Colonial Warfare,” 389.

⁸⁹Griffin, “A Revolution in Colonial Military Affairs and the *Tache d’Huile*,” 24.

⁹⁰Gallieni, *Gallieni au Tonkin*, 14, 137, 179.

⁹¹Laure Loucopoulos, “La Revue Militaire de l’Etranger, 1872-1914, acteur majeur de la formation des officiers au début de la 3eme République,” 25 January 2012, <http://fr.calameo.com/read/001126275fd4a3a198598> (accessed 8 February 2012), 1-3.

⁹²Lieutenant-Colonel Ditte, *Guerre dans les Colonies, Organisations – Exécution, Conférences faites à l’Ecole de Guerre*, Henri-Charles Lavauzelle, Paris, 1905.

⁹³Catalogue of Military Review, Service Historique des Armées, Bibliothèque Militaire de Lyon, 2011.

⁹⁴Porch, “Bugeaud, Gallieni, Lyautey : The Development of French Colonial Warfare,” 393; Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954*, 65-73.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

A unique French Colonial Example of Pacification in South-East Asia

The conquest, then pacification, of Tonkin from 1871 to 1897 remains a unique historical case for many reasons. First, it took place in a specific historical timeframe while European nations desired to extend their territory, increase their wealth, expand and defend their values, and gain access to raw materials. Therefore, the intensive willingness to seize, then stay in place clearly modified the political and military commitment in the colony. This example encompasses many aspects of the French colonial expansion. The mix between failures and successes provides the necessary depth to analyze the military action within a set of particular political, security, and cultural circumstances. In addition, as the only Far Eastern possession, this adventure offers relevant and distinctive insights proper to the Indochinese peninsula.

Finally, despite a long and rich African experience, French soldiers and officers adapted their former lessons to the Vietnamese culture and developed some specific procedures and approaches to their new challenges which framed the emerging colonial doctrine. Therefore, as they had already done in Algeria, Senegal, and Sudan, the military leaders took the responsibility for progressively transforming their tools and methods to meet the political guidance and objectives. All these reasons made Tonkin a complete and quite unique historical case which provides several insights for current operations.

Military and Political Relationships

Annam posed numerous challenges to the French officers. At the national level, the colonial expansion remained a sensible topic for the successive governments and the services. Political passion specific to the Third Republic, and competition between the Navy and Army placed Tonkin into the national debate. As a result, from Navy Lieutenant Garnier to R.G. de Lanessan, the political inputs and control represented a major constraint. Until 1883, the lack of coordination between the ministries coupled with internal political tensions regarding the south-east Asian affairs fostered an environment, the initiative and freedom of decision for the officers. On the other side, this aspect was also a shortfall. The absence of strong and constant policy drastically disrupted the coherence of operations and weakened the military leadership at the local level. However, even if the pacification of Tonkin suffered from difficulties between military and political leadership for a couple of years, the final governmental coordination created the conditions for success at the local level.

Locally, the efficiency of conquest and pacification depended heavily on the complicity between the higher political authorities and the senior military leadership. The close relations and mutual confidence between Captain Rivière and R.G. Mr. Le Myre de Vilers, as well as Jean de Lanessan and his military subordinates greatly facilitated the colonial policy. On the other side, the distrust between Paul Bert and the military forces undermined the security operations in Tonkin. As it was crucial for the strategic level, the unity of approach enhanced the pacification process.

Finally, the fusion of politics, administration, economy, and security at the local level revealed the essence of the French colonial approach. The unity of effort was

clearly a personal affair at the national and regional level. The real change occurred when officers assumed the political and administrative duties in their area of operation. A first attempt was conducted by Navy Lieutenant Garnier and Captain Rivière. Unfortunately, the crisis with China, their deaths, and insecurity in Tonkin ended this approach. The renewal of this approach happened when *Résidents Généraux* officially authorized Lieutenant-colonel Pelissier and Colonel Gallieni to set up a military administration of Tonkin. This extraordinary organization concentrated all the tools and leverages to control the population, secure the village, support the traditional authorities and economic development, and compel the opponents.

The military and civilian relationship required a strong unity of effort and action in Tonkin. Historically, success rose once military leaders and political masters shared the same understanding, developed a coherent plan, and trusted each other.

Cultural, Terrain and Enemy Approaches

Very early, French officers established a cultural-based approach to understand their environment and adjust their behaviors to the local customs and traditions. The degree of adaptation varied for political reasons between a complete association and assimilation policy. Numerous examples illustrated how French forces were prone to identify the cultural environment to facilitate their missions. In this frame, the creation of the college for Navy officers and Inspectors of Indigenous Affairs by Admiral de la Grandière in 1873 as well as the willingness to map the human borders under Gallieni's command marked the success of cultural approaches. In both cases, the comprehensive understanding supported the conduct of political operations (divide to rule) and facilitated the establishment of forces in accordance with local customs.

On the other side, the comprehension of opposing forces suffered from a lack of intelligence and clairvoyance. On one side, Chinese forces were clearly identified and depicted contrary to the rebellion and piracy. Surprisingly, French officers misinterpreted somehow the roots of nationalism and criminality in Tonkin. Such a situation reduced the efficiency of the operations conducted in the Delta during the pacification and led to an inadequate course of action.

In other words, several years and some failures were necessary for the officers to identify the local tribes and ethnic groups as objectives to secure and convince. At the same time, the use of local forces as a militia, auxiliary units or police force against piracy took a long time to be integrated into military operations and strategy. The final years demonstrated that cultural and accurate enemy analysis were necessary and provided a holistic and comprehensive approach. As a result, the analysis of the enemy was clearly indispensable to defeat the opponent but the cultural approach was the key enabler to facilitate friendly deployment, implement the French policy, and finally obtain victory.

French officers struggled to find the right balance between terrain, enemy, and people approach. Initially, due to the lack of French forces, the Navy officers hoped to leverage the population in order to implement their plan. In this framework, the seizure of Hanoi in 1873 and 1882, as well as the key cities in the Delta facilitated the control of population and indirectly of the country. This risky approach failed to defeat opposing forces, especially the Black Flags. Later, against more conventional enemies, the French forces focused their action on the key terrain positions (cities, fort, bridges, and crossroads). This attempt enabled the French forces to defeat the Chinese armies but did

not prevent the piracy and insurgency from controlling the villages and populated remote areas. Finally, the pacification approach mixed a terrain and people approach into a holistic method. The balanced dialogue between control of key positions and axis with the control of population greatly facilitated the final pacification by preventing the enemy mobility and grasp on people. More than a monologue, the pacification highlighted the necessity to conduct a cultural, enemy, and terrain approaches.

Adaptation and Transformation

The conquest of Tonkin was full of rich experience. In addition to the geographical and cultural challenges, the French forces faced very different enemies operating within the population.

In a certain way, the terrain, epidemics, and climate drastically affected the ability of western forces in combat. Mobility, protection, sustainment, and health suffered more than in Europe from the Asiatic features. Moreover, guerrilla, criminality, and orthodox forces coordinated their actions and offered a serious defiance. Consequently, Tonkin was a specific case for the French colonial experience in where hybrid forces using the local specificities challenged an organized force tailored for large scale operation.

The first characteristic of this adaptation was pragmatism sustained by an empiric mindset. The column warfare already developed during the African campaign remained an adequate tactics. Its adaptation to Tonkin required numerous changes but demonstrated its efficiency against the Chinese forces. The officers fully integrated the naval assets into their plan to sustain the forces but also to scout, guard, delay and support the main operations. This joint approach that was deployed without any doctrine displayed the ability to transform and cleverly employ the tools provided over the

services and the unity of command at the regional level. Later, the officers balanced large operations with small outposts covering remote areas in order to control the population and collect information. This method pushed the piracy into its lairs and thereby facilitated its destruction. Consequently, tactical adaptations to the local circumstances and enemies allowed the French troops to efficiently oppose the opponent strategy.

The use of local forces was the second characteristics which provided some interesting insights. The question of command and also their use in the battlefield rose quickly. The historical experience showed that indigenous forces were more efficient in their area of recruitment than outside. In this frame, the French officers did not recruit natives to build up a national army or increase their legitimacy but rather to reduce the size of the expeditionary forces by increasing the auxiliary forces in their areas (economy of French forces). Furthermore, even if some local leaders were appointed to command the Tonkinese forces, the bulk of leadership was armed by western officers and non-commissioned officers. That was the solution to ensure the coordination in the battlefield with the French units and also the way to control the units and their behavior. However, even if the ratio of native forces singularly increased, the main action was still conducted by western troops. Finally, indigenous forces also assumed the protection of villages (self-defense forces), the police under the traditional authorities command, and provided some militia to control large areas. The key to success depended on the progressive alignment among the different chains of command to put them under the French military authorities.

All these adaptations were different from the recent colonial operations and continued the tradition of indigenous forces supporting the French pacification.

Officers, the Keystone to Employ the Forces

The officer corps was the key element which participated in the conquest. Whether from the Navy or the Army, they committed themselves fully and proposed numerous improvements. Their understanding of their environment facilitated the development of colonial administration. This personal and intellectual commitment reflected in their doctrinal influences and their personal involvement to lead their units.

The comprehensive approach proposed by senior officers clearly displayed their pragmatism and willingness to exploit each opportunity. In 1873 and 1883, the attempts to seize Tonkin relied on personal initiative. Later, the “oil spot strategy” elaborated at the local level illustrated also the ability to develop some practical solutions matching the local culture. These successive examples highlight how officers operated in their areas of responsibility using their education, training, experience, and civilian skills. Moreover, many revealed some diplomatic talents to negotiate with Chinese leaders, administrative competencies to rule their district, and engineering skills to develop the roads, railways and buildings.

In addition to these intellectual and practical contributions, they also demonstrated a physical courage to lead their troops from the front. The high ratio of officer casualties stressed their importance and exposure to the enemy fire. The current tactics and doctrine is not sufficient to explain why military leaders decided to fight with such an élan. Consequently, the role and place of officers remained crucial to understanding, planning and conducting the conquest, then pacification of Tonkin. Their personal qualities grew during this period and some of them achieved high rank during

their career as generals (Lyautey, Gallieni) or influenced their peers (Grandmaison) before World War I.

Doctrinal Impact on Colonial Warfare

The legacy of Tonkin set the conditions for a renewal in the colonial doctrine and shaped the next major conquests.

Numerous officers wrote their memories and lessons from their campaigns. Whatever the format, the number of books provided the necessary baseline to educate the future colonial officers. Based on the overseas examples, the War College in Paris started teaching the specificity of colonial operations. In parallel to this effort, Gallieni and Lyautey published some pamphlets which included their views and proposals to pacify a colonial territory. The campaign in Madagascar led by Gallieni included the oil spot strategy. Later, Lyautey in Morocco attempted to use the same approach despite the difference of climate and terrain.

Some tensions and debates rose between the supporters of the colonial warfare and metropolitan officers. The question centered on whether to build up a force recruited, trained, equipped, organized for the colony or a force able to conduct operations in Europe as well as Africa or Asia. This problem remains relevant today. Therefore, the heritage of Tonkin in the French Army was quite important since numerous forces were dedicated to the colonies and Tonkinese regiments took place in the general organization like *zouaves, spahis, tirailleurs Algeriens, or Tunisiens*. Consequently, the doctrine like the forces was inherited from the Asiatic experience and doctrinal consensus among the officers.

Final Thoughts

The study of Tonkin provided some interesting insights regarding the French officers in a hostile and unfamiliar environment. The successive difficulties and failures proved that a lack of national support and tensions between political masters and military leadership disrupted the general policy and delayed the success. On the other side, the absence of doctrine or a strict policy opened the doors to the strong individualities that developed original approaches from their background, experiences, and tests in the field. Such an atypical environment in military warfare fuelled personal reflections maybe richer than those issued from a military corpus and strict lesson learned process.

In the case of a very original and unfamiliar environment, it is possible to wonder if a borderless framework does not foster deep, honest, and candid observations which support creativity and quicker adaptation. It is also possible to consider that the lack of doctrinal corpus explained the different failures. Regarding colonial warfare, it was quite obvious that the current assumptions relied on the superiority of western equipment, training, and tactics over the local forces. Western doctrine applied and adapted by the officers remained more efficient than piracy, rebels, and even Chinese modern armies.

The real gap was the transition between a military conquest and a political pacification. No doctrine provided such a deeper approach and sufficient answers to face the challenges. In this frame, several officers tried to grasp this concern and applied their methods from their personal understanding. Consequently, the pacification was the fruit of key personalities who understood, seized opportunities, and convinced their political masters.

Regarding the current environment, the operational approach implemented in Tonkin highlights several key characteristics. The military success and political victory relied on a close coordination and cooperation between the army strategy and the political effort. The purpose was to divide the population from the enemies, and at the same time, gather the friendly efforts together. As a result, China became a close partner in defeating the piracy by denying a portion of the former sanctuaries and limiting the enemy freedom of movement. This diplomatic success depended on pressure and conviction. In the field, officers developed a bottom-up approach which matched the cultural and traditional organizations based on village and tribes. This approach did not disrupt the daily life and facilitated the comprehension of threats and grievances. Therefore, it was relatively easy to revitalize the local economy by increasing the communications, securing the markets, and improving health. Such a global approach was the result of a long process mixing cultural, political, economic, and military lessons.

Undeniably officers played a crucial role far from their traditional area of expertise either at the head of pacification or on the battlefield implementing policies and leading their troops. The absence of colonial doctrine represented an essential characteristic of French colonial warfare in Tonkin. Based on this angle, further historical studies could demonstrate the relative efficiency of critical and above all creative thinkers facing complex and unfamiliar problems. Therefore, additional research should analyze and compare the officer training and education in the western officer courses as well as their civilian relations before World War I. From this, a more accurate answer could stress the importance of personalities and military genius to adapt the military tools to pacification.

APPENDIX A

CHRONOLOGY

1848-1883: Reign of Tu Duc, Emperor of Annam.

1862-1879: Government of admirals over Indochina. Navy admirals controlled the Ministry of Marine and Colonies, as well as the *Résident Général* positions in Saigon.

1865-1872

January 1865: Treaty of Hué which closed the retrocession process.

1865: Rear-Admiral de la Grandière created a military administrative structure with officers called Inspection of Indigenous Affairs.

5 June 1866: Expedition on the Mekong River led by Navy Commander Doudart de Lagrée and Navy Lieutenant Francis Garnier to discover a gate to Yunnan in China.

1872: Jean Dupuis, French merchant started developing its business with Chinese in Yunnan.

1873

February: Rear-Admiral Dupré started a cultural college to teach Annamite culture to French officers.

5 November: Francis Garnier arrived at Hanoi with its gunboats and troops.

20 November: Seizure of the citadel of Hanoi by Francis Garnier.

21 December: Francis Garnier killed in action.

1874-1881

5 March 1874: Navy lieutenant Philastre settles the Treaty of Saigon which triggered the evacuation of Tonkin. France kept the harbors of Haiphong, Hanoi and Qui Nhon.

13 May 1979: First civilian governor Mr. Le Myre de Vilers (former Navy officer).

October 1881: Mr. Coutin and Villency were blocked during their expeditions on the Red River.

1882

25 March: Departure of Captain Rivière's mission.

26 April: Navy Captain Rivière seized citadel of Hanoi.

1883

19 May: Navy Captain Rivière killed in action.

30 May: The French parliament voted the credits and the military reinforcements.

17 July: Tu Duc's death.

18-20 August: The French Fleet bombarded the forts of Thuan An.

25 August: Treaty Harmand between France and Annam.

16 December: Battle of Son Tay (French victory), and replacement of R.A. Courbet by Brigadier General Millot.

1884

4 February 1884: Battle of Hao Ha (French victory).

6-24 March: Battle of Bac Ninh (French victory).

11 May: Treaty of Tientsin with China.

6 June: Treaty Patenôtre with Annam – French protectorate over Tonkin.

23 June: Ambush of Bac Lé (French defeat).

31 July: Ham Nghi king of Annam.

22 - 23 August: Naval battle of Fou Chou- French Fleet led by R.A. Courbet sank Chinese battleships.

6/7 October: Battle of Lap (French victory).

8 October: Battle of Kep (French victory).

10 October: Battle of Chu (French victory).

30 October: R.A. Courbet seized Formosa (French victory).

November– 3 March 1885: Siege of Tuyen Quan.

1885

3-13 February: Operation to seize Lang-son.

4 February 1885: Battle of Thai Ho Ha (French victory).

13 February: Generals Brière de L'Isle and de Négrier seized Lang Son.

2 March 1885: Battle of Hao Moc (French victory).

29 - 31 March: R.A. Courbet seized Pescadores Islands.

30 March: French retreat from Lang Son under pressure of Chinese.

30 March: Fall of Jules Ferry's government.

9 June: Second Treaty of Tianjin with China.

5 July: Annamite attack of the French position in Hué. The regent and the emperor fled.

As a consequence, French authorities decided to put Dong Khanh on the throne.

October: Operation of Than Mai (French victory).

December 1885: French electoral decision to stay in Tonkin by 4 votes (274 versus 270).

1886

8 April to 11 November: Paul Bert, *Résident Général* of Annam and Tonkin.

December-February 1886: Operations of Ba Dinh.

1887

February: Operation of Macao.

October: Operation of Bo Gia.

October: Creation of Indochina made of Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina. This administrative organization was under the Ministry of the Navy and Colonies responsibility.

1888

2 November: Former emperor Ham Nghi captured.

1889

28 January: French authorities put Thanh Thai on the throne.

April 1889: Pacification of Son La.

September: Operation of Thoung Lam.

27 December: Pacification of Tanh Hao Dao.

1890

1891

June 1891: Jean Marie Antoine de Lanessan, *Résident Général* of Indochina.

1892

1893

France extended protectorate over Laos.

March to June: Commission of demarcation on the French-Chinese boundary.

4 December: Seizure of Thai Ngan a pirate strongpoint.

December 1893-January 1894: Operations in Lung Lat.

1894

March: Diplomatic meeting between Colonel Gallieni and Marshall Sou Com Pao to establish the border.

31 December: Jean Marie Antoine de Lanessan is recalled.

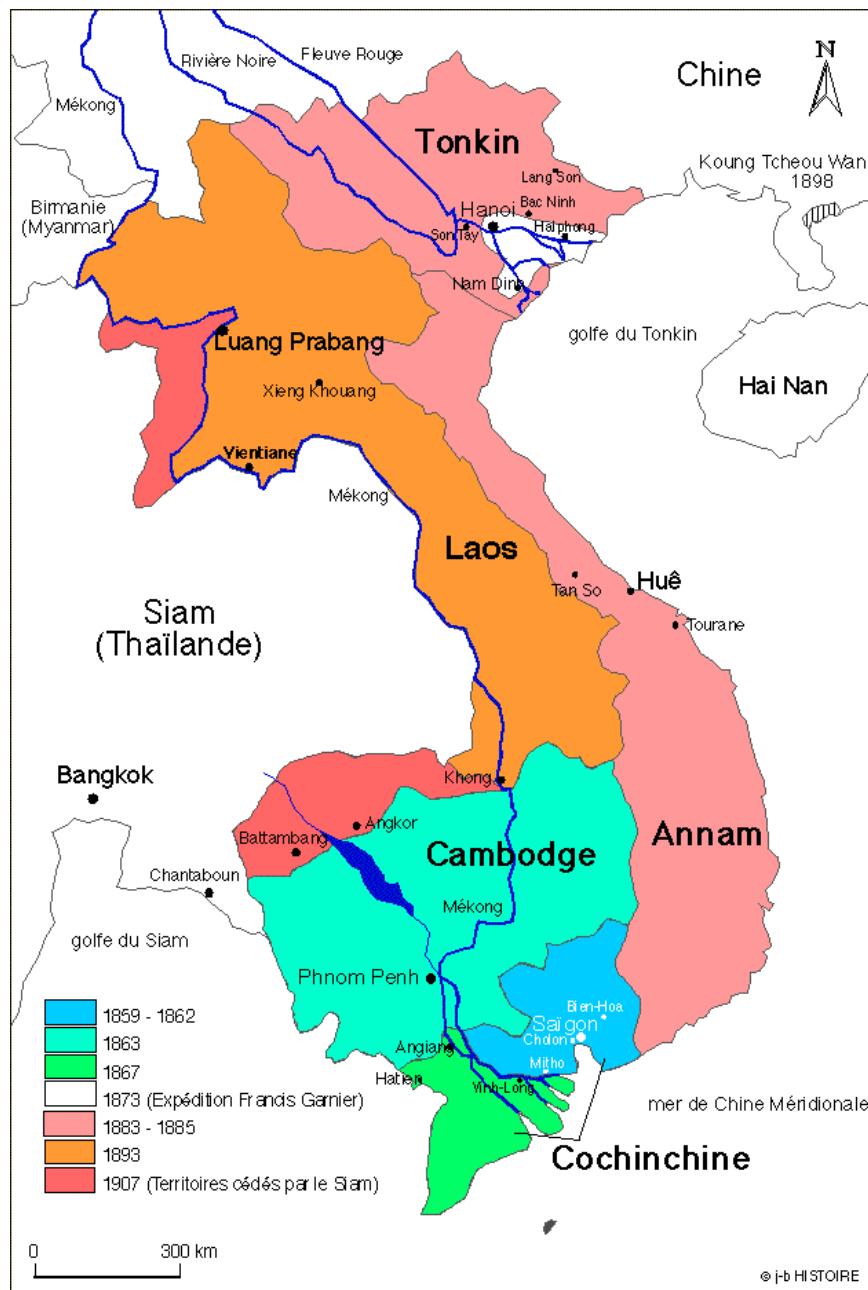
1895

April-May: Military operations against pirate leader Ba Ky.

October-December: Military operations against pirate leader DeTham

APPENDIX B

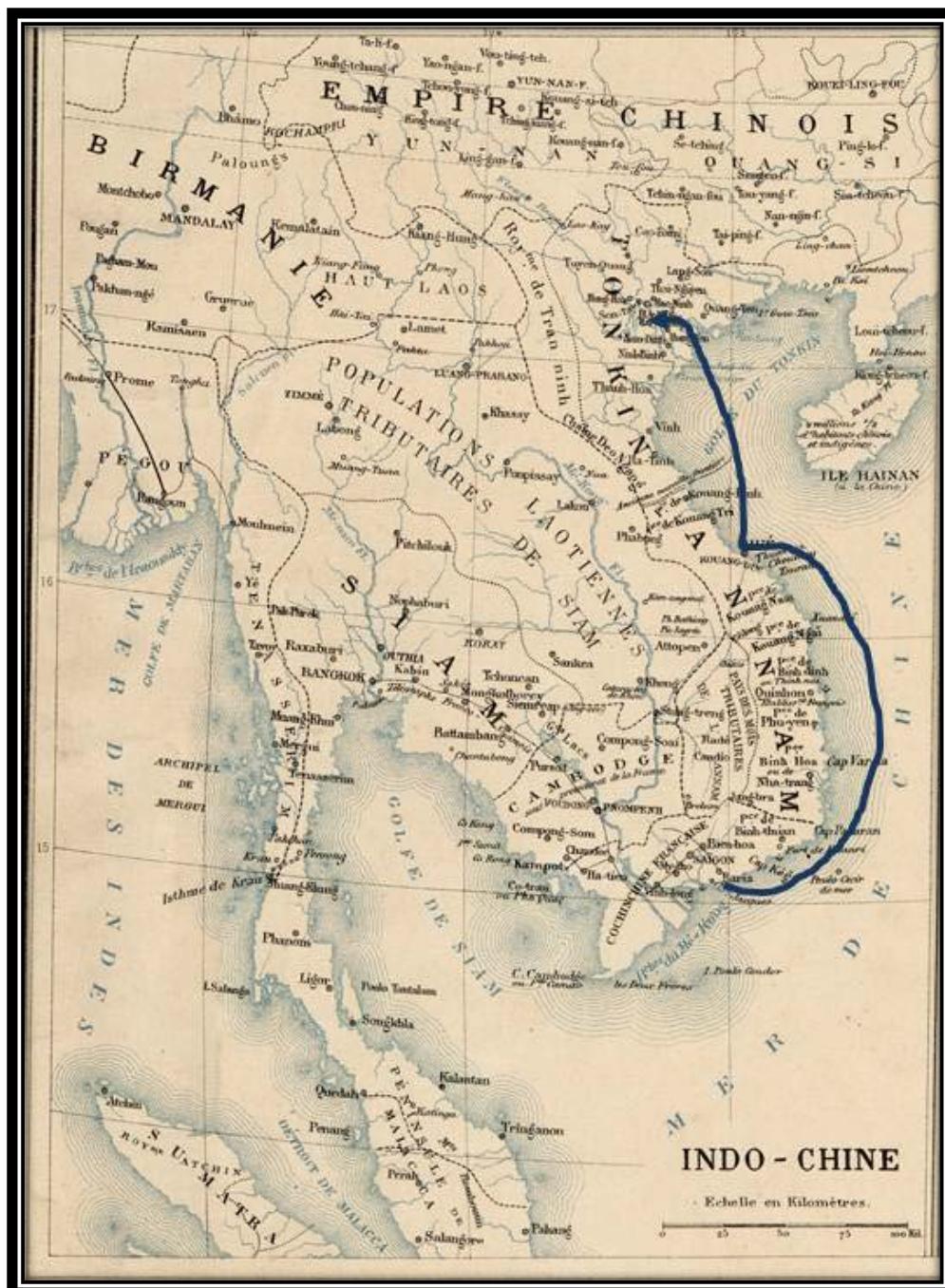
MAP OF COLONIZATION OF INDOCHINA



Source: Casahistoria website, <http://www.casahistoria.net/images/indochina%20conquest%20map.gif> (accessed 25 April 2012).

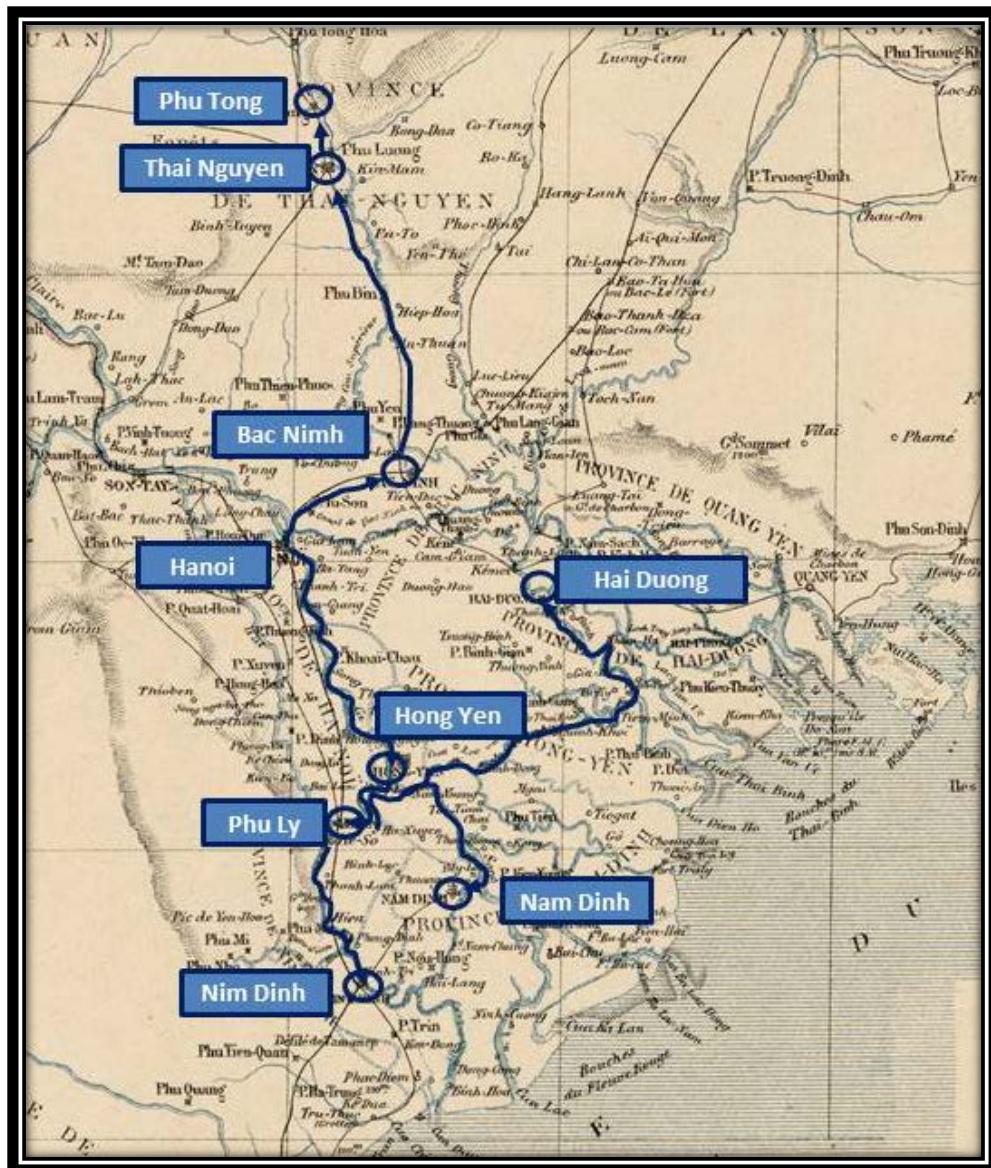
APPENDIX C

MAP OF GARNIER AND RIVIÈRE'S OPERATIONS



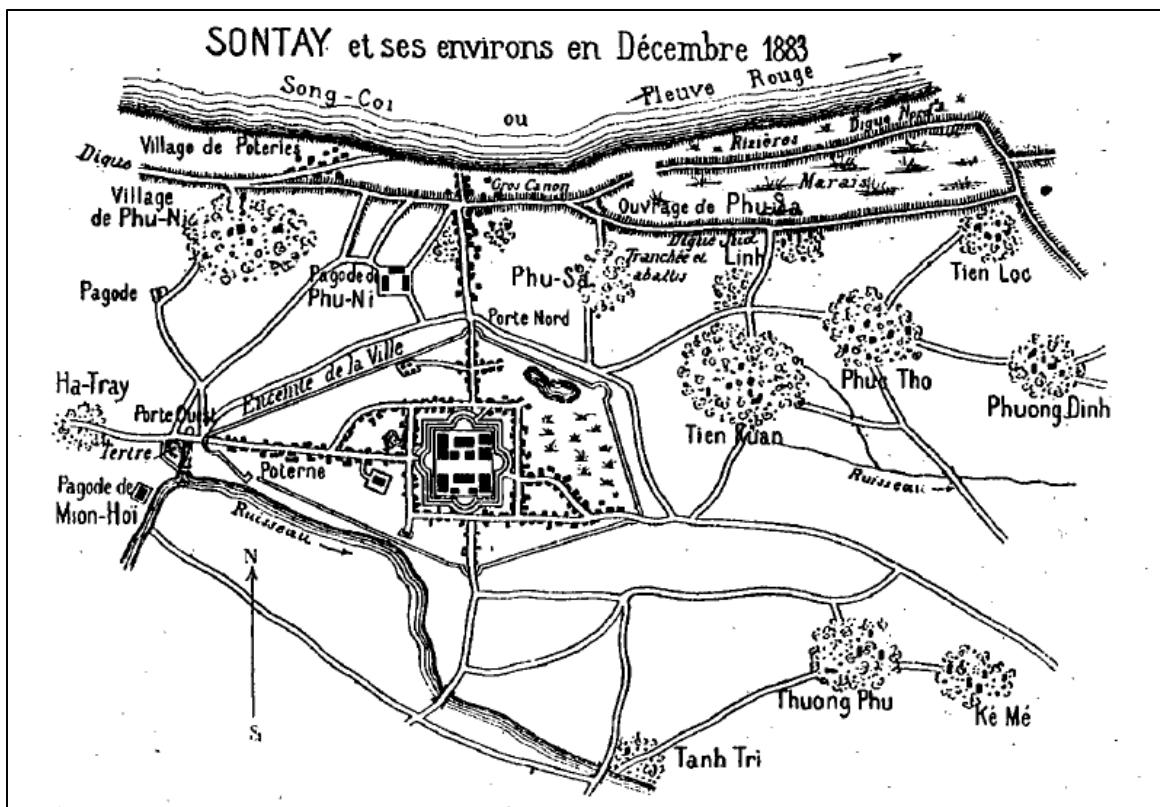
Source: Created by author, extract from the map drawn by Lieutenant A. Gouin, *Map of Tonkin* (Paris: Challamel, 1885).

APPENDIX D
MAP OF OPERATIONS IN TONKIN (NOV-DEC 1873)



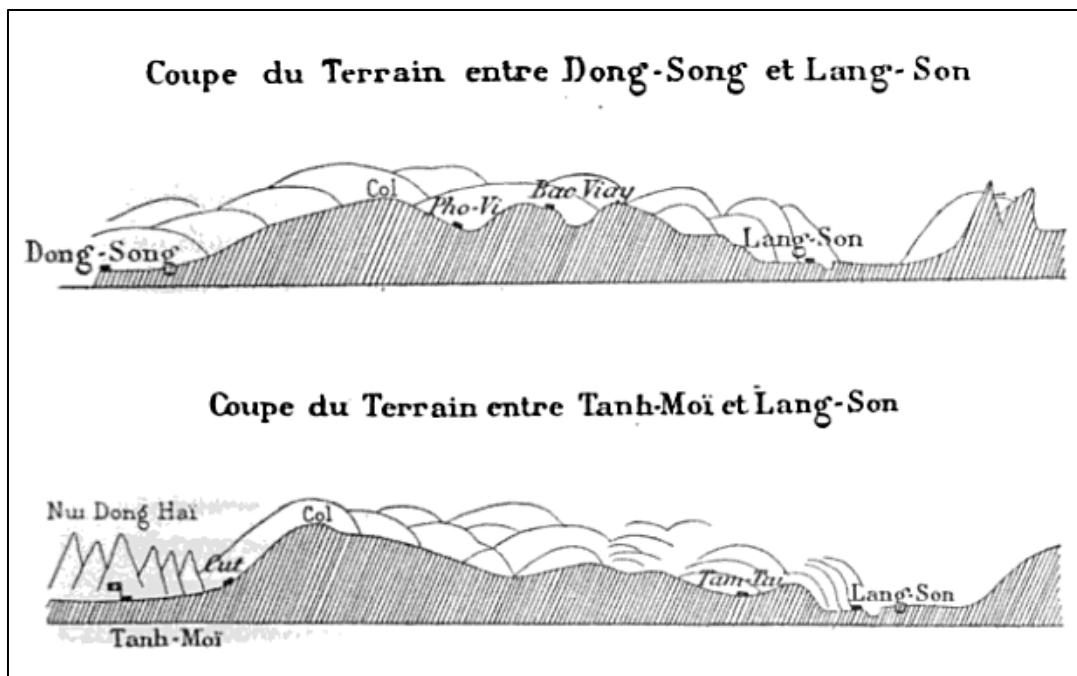
Source: Created by author, data from the map drawn by Lieutenant A. Gouin, *Map of Tonkin* (Paris: Challamel, 1885).

APPENDIX E
MAP OF SON TAY (DECEMBER 1883)



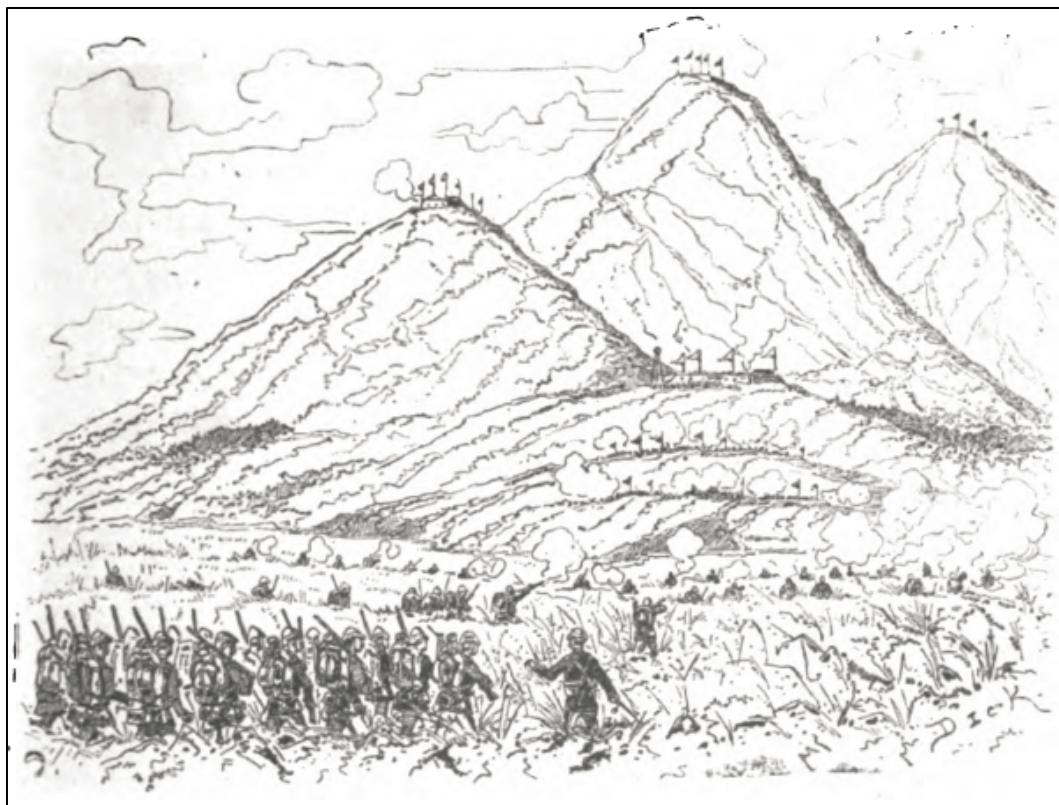
Source: X de P, "Souvenirs du Tonkin," *Revue du Cercle Militaire* (Paris: Paul Dupont, 1st semester 1894), 134.

APPENDIX F
PROFILES OF MAIN SUPPLY ROADS (FEBRUARY 1885)



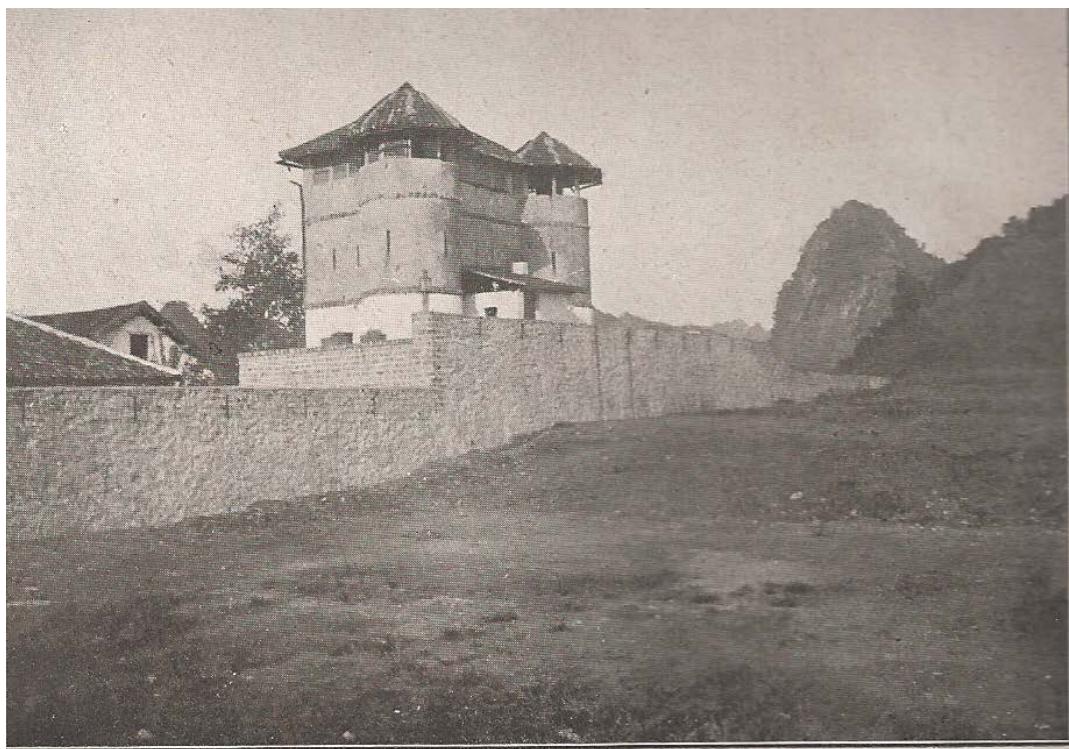
Source: Captain Jean Lecomte, *Lang-Son: combats, retraite et négociation* (Paris: Henri Charles Lavauzelle, 1895), 357.

APPENDIX G
SEIZURE OF DONG SONG (FEBRUARY 1885)



Source: N. Hardoin Dick de Lonlay, *Au Tonkin (1883-1885)* (Paris: Librairie Garnier Frères, 1886), 477.

APPENDIX H
MILITARY POST OF TA SUNG (1895)



Source: Gallieni, Joseph-Simon, *Gallieni au Tonkin* (Paris: Berger Levraut, 1941), 176.

APPENDIX I

LIST OF GOVERNOR GENERALS ANNAM AND INDOCHINA

Chargé d'affaire in Tonkin

- 30 July 1875 to 13 December 1876: Mr. Rheinart.
- 14 December 1876 to 5 October 1879: Mr. Philastre.
- 6 July 1879 to 5 October 1880: Mr. Rheinart.
- 6 October 1880 to 17 August 1881: Mr. de Champeaux.
- 13 August 1881 to 28 March 1883: Mr. Rheinart.

Commissaire général de la République Française in Annam and Tonkin

- 23 July 1883 to 24 December 1884: Mr. Harmand.

Ground and Naval Force Commander

- 25 December 1883 to 11 February 1884: R.A. Courbet.

Expeditionary Force Commander

- 12 February to 7 September 1884: General Millot.

Plenipotentiary Minister, Résident Général

- 1 October to 31 December 1884: Mr. Lemaire.

Force Commander

- 1 January to 30 May 1885: General Brière de L'Isle.

Force Commander and *Résident Général*

- 31 May 1885 to 26 January 1886: General Roussel de Courcy.

- 27 January to 7 April 1886: General Warnet (acting *Résident Général*).

Résident Général

- 8 April 1886 to 11 November 1886: Mr. Paul Bert.

12 November 1886 to 28 January 1887: Mr. Paulin Vial (acting *Résident Général*).

29 January 1887 to November 1887: Mr. Bihourd.

16 November 1887 to April 1888 Jean Antoine Ernest Constans.

April 1888 to 31 May 1889 Étienne Antoine Guillaume Richaud.

31 May 1889 to April 1891 Jules Georges Piquet.

April 1891 to June 1891 Bideau, (acting *Résident Général*).

June 1891 to 31 December 1894 Jean Marie Antoine de Lanessan.

March 1894 to October 1894 Léon Jean Laurent Chavassieux.

December 1894 to February 1895 François Pierre Rodier, (acting *Résident Général*).

February 1895 to 10 December 1896 Paul Armand Rosseau.

December 1896 to 13 February 1897 Augustin Julien Fourès.

13 February 1897 to October 1902 Joseph Athanase Paul Doumer.

Sources: Paulin Francois and Alexandre Vial, *Nos premières années au Tonkin* (Voiron, France: Baratier et Mollaret, 1889), 492 and 493; author's compilations.

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